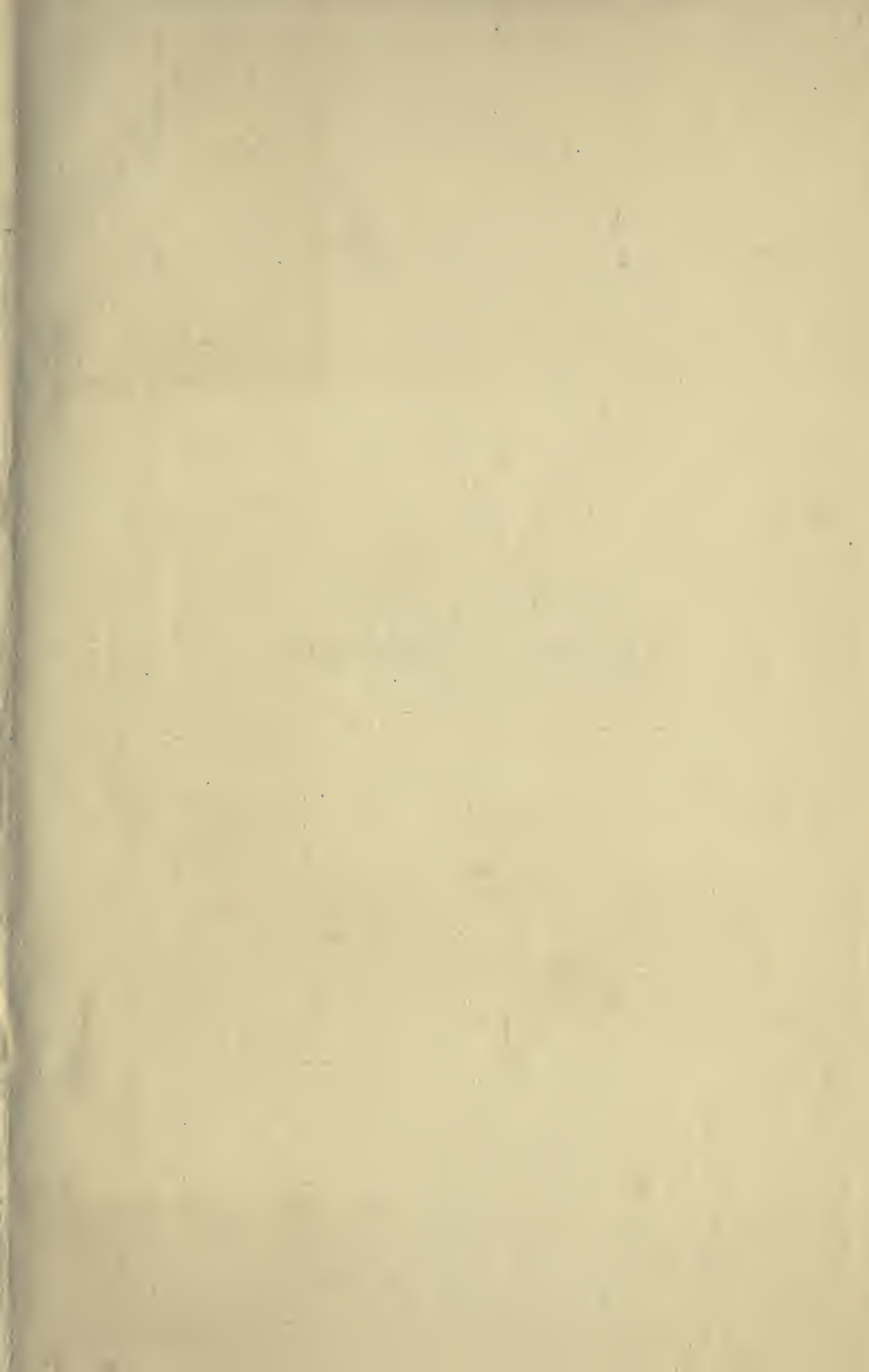




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THE HAPPY FAMILY

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE CASEMENT

THE YOUNG IDEA

THE MERRY HEART

THE HAPPY FAMILY

BY

FRANK SWINNERTON

METHUEN & CO. LTD.

36 ESSEX STREET W.C.

LONDON

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TO

METHUSALUM

A VERY OLD FRIEND OF MINE

It is to be clearly understood that all the characters in this book are fictitious. Readers who imagine that they detect 'portraits' in the sections treating of the publishing trade will be wasting their ingenuity.

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THE HAPPY FAMILY

CHAPTER I

FAMILY HISTORY

I

JERRARD AMERSON, at the age of thirteen, was one of several boys in the service of Dickertons, the printers. He carried lunches for the men, and hung about, waiting to be served, in steaming ham-and-beef shops where they sold brisket piled in layers upon great spikes, and boiled beef, and boiled pork, with carrots and pease-pudding and grey plum-pudding in long rolls like dead spotted snakes, and hot saveloys and faggots as rich and odorous as the black puddings themselves. He used to carry back to the works greasy packets of pork and pudding, with beer-cans full of boiling tea and coffee; and his apron was green and black with greasy printers' ink. And these days, when he joined the shouting mob at mid-day, and watched the long knives slipping easily through the succulent pork or the oozing brisket, when he smelt the cloying pease-pudding and the pasty spotted-dog, were the happiest in his life. He loved to watch the proprietor of the ham-and-beef shop, in his white apron, cutting with the keen *justesse* of the fine artist, and to gaze in fascination at the scales which seemed as though they would never be moved by the added slices, until at last they dropped with a slow dignity, hesitating for the exact weight, and were promptly relieved from their suspense by the proprietor's eager hand. He liked, while

he was waiting, to see a man come, hurriedly and perspiring, from the steaming murk behind the counter, bearing fresh supplies of food ; and to hear the endless clatter, and the babble of voices, and to heave his way through the others, laden with heavy packets that announced, in furious steam and odour, their glorious contents. Sometimes, when he was quite an old man, he found his ancient delights, rather vague through long forgetting, awake again in his imagination ; and then he would rest his head upon his hand, and think about those hurried, eager days, when there was no time for fears of the future, and when the days were short and full of happy auguries ; and he would shake his head as he thought, knowing that he had never been as happy since.

When he learnt his trade, of course, Jerrard Amerson grew more fastidious, thinking of what was due to his increasing years, just as he watched the hair growing fresh upon his face and marking his new manhood. He would not then run the risk of being seen in a ham-and-beef shop ; but sent a boy for his own lunch, and ate it near the silent machinery, which had been still pounding along, and shaking all the flooring, for a few seconds after the sounding of the sharp luncheon whistle. Those days, too, he sometimes remembered, when he had been feeling his own ambition, and recognizing his power to make something of his life ; but they were dimmer in his recollection, because they had no sweet smells or poignant experiences to bring them clearly to his mind—only a consciousness of swelling and swollen dignity, and a pride in himself that had been betrayed by his later years of passivity. Then, later still, Jerrard took classes at the Working Men's College, and met others who, like himself, were straining at ambitions beyond their reach, uneducated until they joined the classes, reading Whateley's *Logic*, and John Stuart Mill's works, and Carlyle's '*Heroes and Hero-Worship*,' and cheap volumes of essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson, until they seemed actually to have talked each other into an impotent sense

of the greatness of life, and ethical problems, and dreams of material advancement. On the wings of his new learning, Jerrard became a 'reader' for the firm, and wore collars and cuffs, and was called 'Mr. Amerson'. Old Mr. Dickerton took notice of him, believed in him, asked his opinion, treated him with special consideration; and at last offered him a position in the office where his ability, which had a little outgrown its strength, might have a chance of revealing itself. Jerrard showed, in his new work, that he had a true sense of practical things, and he forsook gradually those ideas of intellectual importance which he had been cosseting; so that at last he grew valuable to the firm and was publicly praised by old Mr. Dickerton. Those were days when a man really made his own career; and Jerrard Amerson saw stretching before him a clear hard road to a definite and practical goal. He wanted to become manager of Dickertons. And manager he became.

II

But before that time, when he was a little over thirty, he married his cousin, Alice Rodwell, rather gravely considering the problem of married life and its responsibilities. It was right to marry, and to have a home, and to beget children. He had no relatives, excepting his mother, of whom he was very fond; but he desired to conform to that custom which demands that men shall marry. It was his duty to marry. Somewhere in his heart, Jerrard retained an idea of a wife as a ministering angel; but the idea lay very deep, and was never disturbed in the course of his life, until he was quite old, and not quite master of the flitting thoughts that ran like adventurous mice through the darkness of his brain. His cousin, Alice, was a little younger than he was; he had known her for many years, and he believed that was all to the good. He had yet to discover that long acquaintance is not always a sign of deep familiarity; but his mother knew to a fine point of

definition the character of the new Mrs. Amerson, and could have told all her thoughts if he would but have listened.

Old Mrs. Amerson, with a woman's entire distrust of other women, and a love for her own son that had grown warped into jealousy on his behalf as her pride in him became overbearing, looked upon her new daughter-in-law with a tremendous grave distaste. She was herself barely fifty years of age, and she was strong and active. But she could not yield him to her younger rival. She saw all the work of her love put steadily aside, for an object she could not, in her passionate, dumb sense of mother-rights, approve. She saw Alice Amerson as a girl cold and narrow and self-engrossed. It was an agony to her to see this indolently pretty girl reaping all the generous thoughts and deeds that she wanted for herself, that she had sown and watched over since the time when Jerrard had been first able to understand what was said to him. Sleepless nights had Jerrard's mother, and melancholy days, watching his face for the dull resentment of the disapproval she had not expressed in words, but which, none the less, was plain in her speech and her bearing. Alice laughed once, in a curious way, when she and her lover were leaving the house. 'Your mother doesn't like me,' she said, decidedly; and tossed her head. Jerrard's brow lowered. 'That's ridiculous,' he said, 'you'll *make* her like you.' And he looked down at her, slim and languid as she walked beside him; and gently pinched her arm. '*Don't . . .* everybody's looking!' said Alice, under her breath. She shrugged her shoulders at the idea of making old Mrs. Amerson like her. 'Oh, well, if she doesn't . . . *I* can't make her, I'm sure,' she thought. 'Suppose she thinks I'm not good enough for him.' The idea made her sniff; for she was rather pretty, and she was wearing a new gown. Somehow she was sure of Jerrard, who was too serious to be changeable. She had him fast in her clinging arms.

III

They went to live, quite simply, in Kentish Town; and gradually Jerrard Amerson's happiness slipped away into acceptance of life and its claims upon him. He was never a free man from the time that his wife discovered that she was going to have a baby; and when the boy was born, a year after the marriage, Jerrard knew, in a solid, unemotional way, all that he was ever to know of his wife. She was intensely reliant upon him, careless, aimless in discontent and in complaint, constantly demanding that he should make his life turn inwards to her solitary figure, instead of outwards to the more varied interests that called to his wider thoughts. She wanted all he could give, in fondness, and in strength; but she could give nothing in return. She could, it was true, give him children, and this she proceeded to do, to the number of five. But she was not emotionally responsive; she was an egoist; so that his loyalty passed unchallenged and unacknowledged. These things might have mattered less if she had been a good housekeeper; but she knew little of the ways of house-keeping, and was so incurably careless that she could not remember to keep supplies of ordinary food in the cupboards. Sugar and milk were often missing; bread ran short—these small things irritated Jerrard, and destroyed his warm affection more quickly than temperamental deficiencies, which he might have disguised by self-deception, would have done. He decided that they must keep a servant, since his position at the office was so greatly improved; but the maid they periodically engaged always degenerated into a slattern, and thieved, in order to get her own back upon a wayward and exacting mistress. There was not, for several years, very much cheerfulness in the Amerson home, and Jerrard Amerson grew dull and grey with the anxieties of his work at Dickertons, and the slow, numbing sense of failure in his domestic life.

It was at this point that he appealed to his mother to

come and live with him, for he found that she was beginning to be withered and sad in her loneliness ; and his wife was not capable of doing the work in the house, or even that of the nursery, without some firmer help than rebellious maids could give. There were now five children—in order, Tom, Grace, Teddy, Mabel, and Mary—and as they were all young they were quite beyond their mother's power of control. She had no sympathy with them ; her only idea of child-rearing was that they should be kept very clean, that each should take a dose of liquorice powder every week to keep the family blood cool, and that they should be demonstratively fond of her. Spasmodic punishments first frightened them and then made them distrustful of their mother. She used a little cane in early years, until Tom, the eldest, broke it one day, and put it on the fire ; and, as her legitimate power weakened, she began to bolster it up by injudicious favouritism, in which the two boys were principal gainers. She could not bear that they should show affection to their father. As they grew older, she complained of him to them, shooting little acid glances at her mother-in-law's pursed lips. The children watched, with round, astonished eyes, her large white face, and the tired pale eyes that stared back at them ; and they began to think their father was a very cruel man.

But Mrs. Amerson had no intention of suggesting that her husband was cruel. Her complaints were due simply to the fact that she had no dignity and no reserve. She did not see that she made herself uninteresting to others by her complaints ; but so it was. At first, her cousins said 'Oo—o,' in sympathetic accents of concern ; but at last they became so bored with her unsubstantial troubles that they either ignored her in their turn or despised her as one of those lorn women who are neglected by their husbands and made to serve no good purpose in the world. Somehow her complaints edged the others away, because they did not in any case like to hear complaints that were not scandalous, and because also there is always a tendency

in human beings to shun the neglected, as though they were able to communicate their misfortune. Alice, finding cousins unresponsive, shrugged her shoulders, and turned still more persistently to her home circle. Her nature, from being soft and indolent, became self-engrossed; and she pursed up her lips, and slightly bridled whenever anybody came to see her. Yet her vanity always made her say: 'Oo, you *are* a stranger! But I *know* it's not much pleasure for anybody to come to *my* 'ome.' And with that she would sniff, and say: 'I'm sure I don't know *why*!'

IV

When the children grew old enough to show that they could think and feel a little for themselves, a change came over the Amerson family. It was all at once alive; and Jerrard Amerson came early from his office every day with the discovery that home affairs had now a definite interest for him. He surveyed his children with cautious pride, and was filled with a strange sense of remote concern with them. It startled him to think, sometimes, that they were his—two boisterous, hearty boys, and three pretty little girls who made his heart feel soft as he looked upon their play. He planned soberly for the boys; plans for the girls he left vague, thinking that these were his wife's domain. She, good soul, made plans for nobody, but exacted from all the children sudden startlingly-demanded kisses, which they gave with their hands behind their backs, while their mother mumbled over them. With it all, she was very strict with the children, talking to them in a voice which suggested that she was listening to herself, and demanding to know how each moment of their day had been spent, and if they loved their mummy, and a host of other questions which they learned to answer by rote and without emotion. Gran'ma Amerson, in her reserve, looked upon the five with covetous eyes, but she did not make any advances for their affection, because that was the form her

pride took. In so far as they were her boy's children, they were priceless, but she would no more readily have solicited the love of the children of Alice than she would have desired to expose her private thoughts to Alice herself, and that was a possibility so exceedingly distant as to be negligible. The children thought Gran'ma was a servant of some kind, until they were old enough to gather the impression that she was a sort of bogey. Mrs. Amerson, when she had a genial mood, used Gran'ma as a figure of reproach. She would say: 'Grammer's lying down, dearie. Mustn't make a noise. Come to mummy!' And Gran'ma, sitting alone in her room, would sigh for the sound of jolly, boisterous voices, and rattling boots.

When they were old enough, the boys were sent to a private school in Kentish Town, where they wore little caps with gold badges on them, while the girls went to the Board School, because their father said: 'I pay the rates: I don't see why I shouldn't reap the benefit somewhere!' At that time his hopes were centred in the boys, and he read their weekly reports with attention. Even in those days his comparison of the two was close and remorseless: Tom always had white reports, signifying extreme virtue and virtuosity: Teddy had reports of varying colours, that made his father frown a little. He gradually developed a distrust of Teddy, and was sharp with him at table, so that Teddy became his mother's especial favourite.

V

Tom Amerson grew into a serious boy, strong and active, but full of good opinions of his own ability. In a high, lecturing voice, he told his mother some of the new facts he had gleaned at school. He was like his father in some ways, but was more commercial, thinking coolly in terms of personal advancement. Teddy was happy-go-lucky, and inclined to be facetious, with a slight inclination to over-excitement and a strained power of unconscious exaggera-

tion. Both were dark, and Tom was tall for his age. They looked down upon their sisters, having learned at school that this was the correct attitude for young males to adopt. The girls, finding themselves always of less importance, both at home and abroad, quickly accepted their relatively low position in the world, and followed with docility at the boys' heels. They had learned their place—they were evermore to be led, to attach themselves to somebody stronger, if possible to gain by appeal what was denied to their inferior strength and intelligence. Grace was tall and thin and fair; Mabel was plump, good-tempered, and weak-willed. These two always went wherever their brothers went, and disposed themselves to use Mary as a smiling little pack-horse. Mabel, in those early days, would have sold her soul for chocolates; and Grace would have sacrificed anybody to stand well with Tom and Teddy. They were all, for several years, great friends, for they were all kind to one another, and had not yet developed jealousies. The girls never quarrelled, because Grace was the only one who *wanted* to be the eldest, and she was that by divine right. They were quite content. The family in Marjorie Road had never been so happy. Even Gran'ma found a friend, in Mary—or, at least, she found a little girl who did not shrink from her, but who put up to her grandmother's cheek two warm soft lips the contact of which seemed to make Gran'ma's heart turn cold with fierce love.

Then, one day, everybody heard of Roger Dennett, and that young champion of the Amerson boys' school came to Marjorie Road, and had tea with the Amersons, in great good humour and boyishness. He was younger than Tom, and had a gay, impetuous manner that seemed to suggest unusual vitality. He made Tom and Teddy seem ineffective, so eagerly he talked, and so happily he behaved. The girls—the two younger girls—liked him, and sat wide-eyed while he talked to their brothers about the school, and football, and what he was going to do when he grew up. Teddy, who always imitated everybody, imitated Roger

Dennett, copying his phrases, and holding himself in a similar way : Grace, determined to show that she at least was not over-impressed by kids of boys, sat superciliously turned away, listening with pricked ears to their talk. Mary was openly adoring, with her face smiling away in affection, and her eyes seriously and steadily regarding Roger's radiant face. When, a week later, Roger intervened, saved Mary from Grace's pinches, and at length fought Tom as a protest, and vanquished him, his most fiery and valiant spirit made her his slave. From that day he was Mary's hero. She never forgot it. She carried the memory of it always in her heart; for she had learnt, for the first time, that if one knew what was true it was desirable that one should be ready to fight for the truth. It was her first lesson in moral courage; and they were companions and loyal friends for life thenceforward.

VI

When Tom Amerson was, in due course, ready to begin earning his own living, his father obtained a situation for him with Dickertons, the printers. Teddy hung fire a little; but at last he entered the publishing trade, as an invoice clerk in the house of Tremlett & Grove. The three girls stayed at home, helping their mother; for Gran'ma, by now, was past doing any work, and held a lugubrious and neglected position in the household. But they were all growing up. Tom was twenty-seven, a tall, serious, complacent young man; Grace was twenty-five, also tall, and fair. She had engaged herself to a young man named Gower, whose father was a builder in the neighbourhood; and the match was a sound one. Teddy was twenty-four, a great 'comic' and a favourite with his numerous cousins. Mabel, at twenty-two, was very much as she had been all her life, plump, a little frizzy, and given to superfluous bows and hanging adornments. She was expected to become engaged to a young man named Moggerson; but the match as yet

was one to be indicated with discreet nods and smiles and hints about 'somebody'. Mary was twenty, and she was pretty and good-tempered, but without startling qualities of any kind. She was unconsciously attracting the attentions of a clerk in Ted's office who lived at Hampstead. This young man's name was Bright, and his attentions were so constrained and unlightened by any of the symptoms regarded by the Amersons as characteristics of such phenomena that so far they had escaped notice. For one thing, Mary had not noticed them herself, and although she was very innocent and fully occupied, it might have been expected that she would not be wholly blind to a state of affairs so intimately concerning herself. That she was so entirely unaware of Bright's regard may have been due to her own simplicity or to the unusual caution of the young man himself. But her friend, Roger Dennett, had ceased his regular visits to the house about eighteen months earlier, finding the two young men insufferable; and Mary was friendless and alone in the world except for her own people. Even she had changed, apparently, for life with the Amersons necessarily meant submission to their standards, or rather, unconsciousness that there were any others capable of supporting themselves with dignity and economy. So Mary had to believe what the other Amersons believed, and what her numerous cousins believed. And she was filled, as they were filled, with thoughts of family affairs only. She never went outside her family and the very few friends of her brothers; they constituted her chief interest in life. To her, as to them, the greatest festivity imaginable was a party—a family party, to which all the most remote and stranger cousins should be summoned because of a tie that bound their diverse spirits more closely than any legal agreement. It was a tie of blood—of cousinship: and the symbol of the Amersons' idea of relationship and domestic economy was a Party.

CHAPTER II

THE PARTY

I

WHEN the Jerrard Amersons first began to give parties, Tom was eleven years of age, and the rest of the family went more or less steadily downwards in gradations of age until Mary was old enough only to drink tea with the guests and vanish just as the fun was getting uproarious. But with the Jerrard Amerson family at its full size, and with its various spreadings as each cousin grew old enough to be invited, and, later, to become engaged, the parties increased in significance; the cousins looked forward gleefully to Uncle Jerrard and Auntie Alice's parties. 'Oo, we did have such *fun*,' they would say afterwards, relating the course of events to their bedridden elders or to envious friends. 'Teddy—that's the youngest boy, you know—he is a caution. He recites "Hiawatha's Photographing". Makes you laugh like . . . It's *awfully* good. No Tom's the oldest; he's awfully *clever* . . . knows an awful lot about everything. Yes, there's the girls. Mabel's *awfully* pretty . . . I like her better than Grace, somehow. Don't *you*, Aggie? Grace's a *dear*; only she's—you know—proud. Mary's a *nice* lil thing, course. . . . Oh, but Teddy's awfully comical.' There would be much more to tell about Uncle Jerrard and Auntie Alice and the others; but the mere exploits of the evening grew pallid and even unimpressive in daylight narration. The cousins would grow mystical, because of course the choicest pleasures are quite beyond description by words. There would be hints, about '*somebody*' and an accompaniment of giggles, and cries of 'You

are awful,' and delightful memories of purposeful glances, of blushes, of exchanged sympathies, and tremendous trifles that could be understood only by the initiated. So perhaps, after all, the telling was not the least pleasurable part of the whole business; it contributed definitely to the cousin's innocent confidence in the ultimate gaiety of life.

On a rainy November night the Amersons were giving a party, and the cousins were present in what would have seemed, to those standing outside the Amerson pale, the most outrageous numbers. Young women with frizzy hair and round cheeks had come from all parts of London, followed or accompanied by their male complement, very much at home, with smooth, well-moistened hair and diminutive combs for reviving their moustaches. They all were known by strange archaic family-names, such as 'Crumpet' or 'Kitten,' or 'Bibbus'—names which had been given upon some dim occasion, and which retained their full air of intimacy even through the years. Some of these who lived at a distance met only when one of the branches had a party; others spent delightful Sundays together, singing 'Shine, shine, moon' or excerpts from 'The Belle of New York'; but there, at Kentish Town, one might meet every Amerson with a tolerable use of his or her limbs, gathered together in one of the large rooms. They came, some of the most-liked, to tea; and the others arrived at intervals from six o'clock. Those living farthest away would stop the night, sleeping anywhere or everywhere, until the squalid dawn awoke them to a sense of a cramped universe and the taste of matches. And their happiness, indicated by the amount of noise they made, was evidently of the highest and most determined order. It could not be denied, by these appearances, that all were very happy indeed. The men forgot all rows at the office; the girls made boisterous efforts to please the men; and as they were all cousins jokes were free and delightful. Sallies of every sort produced shrieks of the most exquisite laughter; girl cousins sat on boy cousins' knees; there were, in the course of the

evening, jolly games of kiss-in-the-ring, and postman's knock, and rough-and-tumble musical chairs, in which all grew hot and excited, and uttered the gladness of their hearts in little screams, and shouts, and arch slappings. The elder ones looked on and grinned in sympathy, and eyebrowed at each other significantly at the plain trend of certain incidents. The people next door laughed, and said, 'They *are* enjoying themselves,' and heard next morning from Mrs. Amerson about the outstanding events of the evening. Some of them lent crockery or spoons and glasses; occasionally the younger neighbours were invited, for they gave very little extra trouble, and slipped home in the small hours without inconveniencing anybody. And it was such a treat for them to see the good fellowship of the entire Amerson family, with its dependents and affiliated members. Perhaps, it was conceded, the dancing was the best of all, because there seemed so little space for all the couples, and the bumping was such fun: it was thought that some of it was intentional; and the shouts of laughter caused by the sprawling of an unwary pair was sufficient recompense for a torn skirt or a bruised elbow. Of course there was nothing indecorous, as it was recognized that there might have been if the family had belonged to a lower class: if the men felt that a joke was a little too strong for mixed company they could always step into an adjoining room where the decanters were placed, along with a plentiful supply of tumblers and cigars. There, in a sufficient body, with a keen eye on the door, the male Amersons could breathe their choicest thoughts and enjoy freely stimulant which was expensive elsewhere. There was never any stint in the refreshments, for just as a nation spares no expense at the crowning of a King, so the Amersons did not count pennies in giving their annual party. Even Jerrard Amerson entered sportingly into the spirit of the thing, and saw that special cigars and whisky were obtained in sufficient quantity and at an agreeable price through a man he knew in the licensed victualling trade.

He did not join personally in the fun—he had one or two of the uncles and older cousins up in his room at intervals, and they talked over the business and economic affairs of the family in greater quietness than was possible in the centre of the festivities. And Gran'ma Amerson sat apart, visited periodically by detachments of the girl cousins, with an occasional monosyllabic male, who kissed her loudly and uncomfortably and went through the ordeal of cross-examination. It was always so *complete*, everybody felt: nothing was missing from a party given by Uncle Jerrard and Auntie Alice. There was music, there were games, there was that delicious shortage of chairs that produces sociability, enough to eat and drink (one or two wives rather swamped in, and resentful of, the Amerson conception, thought the refreshment too copious), and there were young people of both sexes to harmonize, unite, and carry on the tradition. It was like a microcosm, a world in little, in which all the inhabitants belonged to the lower-middle-class and spoke the same dialect. If the Jerrard Amersons spoke better than some of their relations, that was by slightly better education and persistent effort; the Jerrard Amersons were, in a sense, the aristocrats of the family; but up to the present this was not recognized, for their instinct at parties remained true. The cousins might regard Grace as 'stuck-up,' although they mentioned it very forgivingly, but at this stage they did not apply that description to the family. They did not generalize; their one feeling about the family was that, as a body, it was jolly and kind; Tom was always 'clever,' and they liked Teddy best because he was so amusing; Grace was proud, Mabel was pretty and nice, and Mary somehow awakened in their minds a very faint and hardly perceptible tinge of pity. For Tom and Grace they had admiration; for Teddy and Mabel they had warm affection; and if they had been pressed as to their feeling towards Mary, they would have said that they supposed she really was very pretty, only—they couldn't tell why—they didn't see much of her, didn't

know her as well as they did the others. They would have hastened back to the family as a whole, and said how nice it was, without ever supposing that they had never made up their minds about Mary, who perhaps was less positive in her character than the others. Besides, she was the youngest, and the youngest in a family is expected to be either pert, or very clever, or a pale copy of her elders, as though her parents had a little lost interest in their craft.

II

The day of the party dawned fair. Grace would make the cakes; Mabel would arrange and dust the rooms; Mrs. Amerson would get in everybody's way, in the mild belief that the worry was all on her shoulders; and Mary would perform miracles in the way of sandwich-making, washing-up, keeping her temper, and general housewifeliness. Mrs. Amerson said: 'Yes, she's a good girl. . . . My *Grace* is such a comfort to me.' Nobody knew (least of all Mrs. Amerson) what she meant, because much that she said and did was obscure, unless it was simply that Grace was the eldest, and should come first. But Mary, approaching Gran'ma privily, said to her on this day: 'Grannie, d'you think you could *talk* to Mamma for a little while to-day? She *thinks* she's helping, but *really* she isn't; and there's such a lot to do.' Gran'ma, with the aspect of a turkey, and strangely pale and red-rimmed eyes, was a horrid sight to all but Mary, and Gran'ma repaid that exceptional kindness with a deeper love than her body seemed capable of generating. So Mary was, for two clear hours, given such an opportunity for close work, that Mrs. Amerson thought even more complacently of her own share in the day's doings, and preparations were well advanced when the rain commenced to fall.

'Oh dear, oh dear!' said Mrs. Amerson, helplessly, at the noise of thunder. 'Now that'll make such a mess.'

'Never mind, Mamma. . . . I'll put a couple of extra

mats in the hall . . . and get a bath for the umbrellas. . . .' Mary hushed her as though she had been a baby.

'Yes . . . but . . . you don't seem to think,' she wailed. 'All those mackintoshes and the wet trailing about the house . . . and Mabel's hair. . . .'

'Mother,' said Grace. '*You* don't seem to think . . . Mabel washed her hair last night. It's *bound* to be floppy. She's not going to curl it . . .'

Grace had not washed her own hair: she would not have sacrificed a curl.

Mrs. Amerson subsided.

'It's very provoking,' she said, in her thin high voice. 'They'll be so wet.'

'Well really, Mother. . . . *We* can't help it . . .'

Grace was already irritated. Her mother *bored* her.

'Grace!' exclaimed Mrs. Amerson, with wounded pride, and as Grace went out of the room with cold dignity her mother said: 'I'm sure, since Grace has been engaged, she's grown *very* . . . Mary, what *are* you doing with that cupboard?'

'Mamma, I can't help it. I'm finding some matting for the mud. And there are all sorts of pokers and hammers and things here.'

'Ah well,' Mrs. Amerson sighed thoughtfully. '*How* was Mabel going to do her hair?'

'She's doing it now.' Mary had not meant to betray her sister; but the words were out before she realized what their sequel would be. Mrs. Amerson instantly toiled up to Mabel's bedroom, and Mary's face screwed up with laughter with the thought of Mabel's dismay at her mother's entrance. Presently there were sounds from above, and Mabel came running downstairs with her *coiffure* still incomplete.

'Mary, you are a little sneak to let her come up! It's bad enough to have your *hair* all limp, without Mother coming and making you swear.'

'*Did* she?' Mary teased. 'I hope she didn't hear. Really, Mabel . . . she's in a very funny temper. Old Grace was quite rude . . .'

'Hooh, Grace . . . Grace thinks the world belongs to her,' sniffed Mabel. 'Does this look all right? No—don't touch it, with your dirty hands.'

'Wasn't going to. It looks very nice.'

'And then Mother comes and spoils it. Says I look a fright. It's too bad!'

A strange wailing reached them as Mrs. Amerson slowly pursued her second daughter. Mabel ran hurriedly into the scullery to avoid her, and Mrs. Amerson forgot why she had come down again into the kitchen.

But Mabel could not stay in the scullery for ever, and presently her plump face appeared in the doorway, secretly, and her mouthings indicated to Mary that Mrs. Amerson should if possible be got out of the way.

'Mamma . . . did you see if the dining-room table was finished?' Mary asked.

'Oh dear . . . ' Mrs. Amerson obediently departed, and Mabel emerged.

'You're a *darling*!' she whispered, and ran for her life.

Mary sat back on her heels and laughed silently for quite a minute—in tiny little jerks that could not be heard in the passage, although the door was open. Taken thus, in small doses, she found her mother bearable; it was only at times, when Mrs. Amerson was too persistent, that it was difficult to make allowances. Mrs. Amerson's smooth white round face looked as though she were merely a placid woman; her rather dull eyes, however, showed a thin line of the white beneath the iris, and this gave her an air of tiredness; her mouth was peevish, and her hair light. Grace's hair was of the same shade, but she made it look better by the way in which it was worn. Mabel's was slightly darker, but she often curled it in a style that made her look like her mother. Some suspicion of this made Mrs. Amerson prefer Mabel's hair curled. Mary's hair curled naturally, but as it was neither blonde nor dark, she was not envied by her sisters, as she might have been if her hair had been a chestnut brown. In all three there was a

strong likeness, although Grace was much the handsomest and showed promise of a still handsomer maturity. Her face would improve, at least, if she had no cause for strong discontent, whereas Mabel was doomed to look like her mother in a very few years, and Mary showed more immaturity than either of her sisters. Perhaps it was that her clear eyes, and small, undecided mouth, suggested inexperience, and a promise of 'character.' Gran'ma, who, in her young days, had been something of a personality, still hugged the recollection, and looked out of her pale old eyes at Mary with a feeling that was too vague and ancient to be communicated aspiration, but which did, nevertheless, suggest that she thought her youngest grand-daughter (in the Jerrard Amerson family) might take after her. That was why Gran'ma had held Mrs. Amerson through all her startings, as the Ancient Mariner held the Wedding Guest.

III

Teddy, when he came home from the office, found himself in the middle of a giggling crowd. They cried out, 'O Teddy, we've been waiting for you,' and somebody added: '*Do say something funny!*'

'Here, gimme my tea!' he cried, humorously. Unerringly, he hit the company's taste. Girls to the number of fourteen drew down their mouths and repeated his remark with enthusiasm, exaggerating his imitation Cockney accent still further. They were not conscious of any reflection upon their own speech, because Cockney as imitated (except by an artist) is like American, as imitated, and bears no resemblance to the original. Teddy passed to his seat, smoothing his rather long hair, and throwing looks and nods of surprised Cockney recognition at his cousins. 'How do, girls?' he said, generally.

'Quite-well-thank-you!' they retorted, in a body, and looked at him admiringly from twenty-eight shining eyes.

Mary came round behind him, carrying the teapot, into

which she was going to put some more tea. Teddy ducked, to an accompaniment of laughter. She said: 'Did you ask Roger, Teddy?' He pretended to consider humorously.

'See now, did I? Of course I did.'

'Is he coming?'

'Said he would.'

'Who's that?' asked Grace, sharply.

'Roger Dennett. He's at Ted's office now, you know.' Mary said.

'Oh, that boy,' Grace shrugged one shoulder, and let her lids drop.

Mary coloured with anger.

'Needn't talk to him!' she flashed.

'Children!' exclaimed Mrs. Amerson. 'How often am I to tell you . . . Teddy, are your feet wet, dear?'

'No, Ma. Shut up kids. Go away, Mary!'

'Oo, did you *ever*!' said the cousins, looking at him with round mild eyes of marvel. 'Oh he *is* a caution!'

'Of course, we haven't seen him for two years,' Grace said, peaceably.

'And, my girl,' said Teddy. 'You ought to be—ah, pardon me, ladies—devilish polite to him. He's got the best job in our place, and him and me have got to be on good terms with one another. See, Grace, my kidling?'

'Oo,' said the cousins, like a wind passing over corn. 'Did you *hear* him?' Afterwards they said: 'we *did* *larf*'.

IV

Roger Dennett walked from his home near the Old Gate House at Highgate in a fine storm of rain, with his coat buttoned against the weather, and his cap pulled low over his eyes. All the streets were deserted, because of the weather—except for solitary couples who stood close together under a dripping umbrella, having no home at which they were jointly welcome. Roger passed whistling along, and the lonely couples, standing silent, unconsciously at

war with the civilized world, followed him with their eyes, wondering that anybody could be so cheerful. Their own happiness was largely a matter of habit. They did not know, because it was mercifully hidden from them, that they were miserable. They would not have had the courage to acknowledge their dead level of unhappiness. For all his whistling, Roger Dennett was wiser than they; but he was well, and in good spirits, and he was going, rather surprisedly, to the Amersons' party.

Roger, who had not been near their house for over eighteen months, had recently become confidential clerk to the manager of Tremlett & Grove's, general publishers. When he started work on the first morning, sitting in his cramped little office, he noted with a bright interest the faces of the clerks who passed or who came to help him in his exploration of things knowable. Among the clerks, to his astonishment, was Ted Amerson, with whom he had been at school. What Ted saw in his position as clerk in a publishing office but the prospect of life-long poverty, Roger could not imagine; but he was certainly there, along with such young men as Septimus Bright, and Person, and Jerdow, Berry, and Gassel (whose names Roger was now beginning to remember with some familiarity), and they renewed acquaintance. Roger was twenty-four, not especially clever, but intelligent and very keenly interested in books and in his work. Ted, about the same age, had no hobby but that of amateurish-theatricals, and did not shape for any distinguished career. But, as Roger had an office to himself, and had intimate relations with Mr. Cadman, the controlling force of Tremlett & Grove's, Ted was eager to be on good terms with him. Ted was naturally keen on friendships, of which he had already formed two at the office—with Jerdow, who lived at Fulham; and with Bright, who lived at Hampstead—and when the date of the party was fixed, he invited both Roger and Bright to share the pleasures of the evening. Later, he proposed to get both of them to buy tickets for a 'show' at

Hampstead; but he had the simple, egoistic soul of the amateur actor, and he liked to have friends round him—'get a jolly old crowd,' as he said himself.

Even before Roger reached the house in Marjorie Road in which the Amersons lived, he knew where the party was. Through the thin mist of the rain, he could see one doorway in which a dozen small electric lights had been arranged (by the mechanical skill of Tom Amerson), and as he approached he became conscious that this house was, of all the road, the only one of any consequence. The builder's art had disposed that, on normal days, the house should be as undistinguishable as it was inseparable from its fellows—Mrs. Amerson thought Marjorie Road was rather like Regent Street, for this reason—and the curve of stucco frontage was pleasantly commonplace. But whereas all the other inhabitants of Marjorie Road seemed to have retired to their basements or their back-rooms, number 43 was bursting with light. Roger stopped, shuddering, at the spectacle.

From within, more lights blazed, as he could see. The Venetian blinds could not conceal the radiance that overflowed from the ground-floor front-room; the upper windows, though dimmer, displayed an unaccustomed lustre: the front basement was bright with a splendid glow, and, as the window had no blind, some of the excellent preparations for supper stood naked and opulent under the eyes of passers. Roger so little appreciated the sight that he gave a quick, short laugh before he knew that he was about to do so. Then he walked up the steps, and shook his cap free of the sparkling rain-drops; the cap hung, a sodden weight, in his hand. Somebody appeared in the hall, so much in the darkness that he could not be sure of her appearance—a tall girl, with fair hair and disdainful carriage. As she stared out at him in silence there came more loudly the hum of a party, and the sound of a voice singing, and the tinkle of a piano. Roger thought she seemed almost to resent his approach,

and his smiling manner; which made it clear that this was a member of the family. He guessed shrewdly at the girl's individuality.

'I don't know whether you're Grace, or Mabel, or Mary,' he said. 'But I'm Roger Dennett.'

The tall figure advanced slightly, so that her face was in the light.

'Oh, come in, Mr. Dennett,' said Grace, in a very refined voice. 'I'm *Miss Amerson*.'

'Ho, ho!' said Roger to himself; but he did not smile.

V

Inside the front door, the noise was at its height. Roger found a place for his wet cap and coat, and he could tell that Grace was disturbed at his lack of an umbrella.

She waited while he wiped his boots, and then a burst of hot air, and the brilliant lights and—as it seemed—hundreds of faces bewildered him. His first impulse was to sit in a corner, but there were no corners. There appeared a shortage of chairs, because a party is no party if everybody can be comfortably seated. A young man, dressed in a rather loud suit, with striped hose and a face that looked as though its original colour had been sand-papered away, was singing, while the company, flushed and uproarious, was listening and laughing. The young man had reached the third verse of a famous song:—

' . . . Got her foot caught in her eyebrow,
Fell in *where* the ripples shine . . . '

Everybody joined enthusiastically in the chorus:—

'Oh my darling, oh my darling,
Oh my darling, *Clementine* ! . . . '

Even Grace relaxed, and sang, as she stood behind Roger, joining with the others in a refined voice. He was conscious of a bewildering mass of hot faces, of girls with fuzzy hair, of young men with open, singing mouths, like the cherubim in old paintings. The scene was really incom-

parable: and everybody was thunderously jubilant. Roger felt a strange secret pang. He had not seen or heard such a thing for ages: he would almost have been ready to deny that it was possible. So does reality upset our notions of the world. 'Damn Nature!' said Fuseli the painter. 'She *always* puts me out!'

From an evening of storm, with pelting rain and sudden gushes of wet wind, Roger had come abruptly to a scene so contrary that he was completely overwhelmed. The rain dried suddenly upon his cheeks, and left them fresher than ever at the hot breath of air that followed upon the opening of the drawing-room door. Teddy came across the room to him, regardless of the song, and shook his hand.

'Here you are!' he shouted. 'Raining, isn't it? I'll introduce you to everybody in a minute.'

'For the Lord's sake!' expostulated Roger. 'Don't.' The idea of being led round the room, to one unfamiliar face after another, as a horse is led out for inspection at a sale, was intolerable. Teddy's quick eyes glanced aside at him, narrowing.

'Rot!' he said. 'They're only our people—and one or two others. Bright's here; have you seen him?' Standing beside Roger, he looked very slim; there was a tired expression over his grey face; deep lines ran from the base of his nose towards the corners of his much-used mouth. With all his air of man-of-the-worldliness, Teddy always gave Roger the impression of being unpractised in the world's ways. '*Must* introduce you,' he said. Roger groaned silently, and looked round for escape.

'Clementine' went on and on, verse succeeding verse and (better still) chorus following chorus. There was a universal tendency to *rallentando* in the final chorus—also, to a vivid *crescendo*. The room trembled; Roger's ears seemed as though they must burst with the roar of sound. Then clapping came, and the singer made a low, burlesque bow that sent some of the girls into fits of laughter.

Others said . . . 'Mabel,' and looked at each other with the air of diplomats. Roger, flinching at the singer's self-satisfaction, and at the introductions now dangerously near, searched desperately for Septimus Bright, another clerk at Tremlett & Grove's. At every turn he met curious eyes, some bright, others soft, others again clear and hard. The cousins whispered about him. He felt again as he had felt when he went to school for the first time.

'Here, Bert!' called Teddy, to the late singer. 'My friend Roger Dennett—my friend Bert Moggerson. . . . Now you know each other. . . . Two of the best.' The singer nodded and smiled still at his recent success, and his white face and jaunty carriage marked him out as a 'dog'. It was easy to imagine his little bowler hat and pliant walking cane. Roger eyed him with distaste. Teddy murmured something further.

'Evening. How's self. . . . Righto, old man: I'll take him round.'

Roger's last hope was gone. But he caught sight of the man for whom he was looking.

'Excuse me,' he said, in a panic. 'I . . . see a man I know. Want to speak to him.' And with that, he moved towards Septimus Bright, who stood near.

There was nothing in Bright's appearance to attract the male, although his cool air of reserve, his long lean face and aquiline moroseness, seemed to interest girls. He reminded Roger of a cat, not in any furtiveness, but for the quietness of his manner and the air of soft determination with which he walked. It was nothing—it was gone in a minute; but Roger felt that he would as soon pass Bright as encounter him. Yet on this evening Bright was, in his eye, as radiant as a gift from the gods; and thus it came about that he was not introduced to the company by Moggerson; and he breathed a silent thanksgiving. He accosted the lean young man.

'Hullo, Bright, it's a relief to see a familiar face.'

‘Hullo, Dennett,’ said Bright, with a curious expression. ‘I was wondering when you’d see me.’ It was clear that he thought Roger had been avoiding him.

‘I’ve been looking round for you,’ Roger remarked, cheerfully.

‘Really.’

‘Awfully devilish not to see anybody you know.’ Roger made conversation.

‘It is. I should like to introduce you to my sister. I’ve mentioned you to her, and as she’s here, she’d like to meet you,’ Bright said, in his slightly pedantic way. ‘She’s just here.’

‘Now, what on earth! . . .’

Roger in an instant found himself face to face with a girl who resembled her brother only to the point of emphasizing the differences between their faces. All Bright’s length and slightly ungenerous cast was softened in her face to a pleasant contour, and her vivacity was so remarkable that she constantly looked pretty and interesting. Although her eyes were not pretty, they had a sort of soft chocolate-brown cordiality most welcome to young men; and indeed the cordiality might have seemed too great, if she had been less attractive. She was very dark; a great deal of dark hair was piled upon her head, and her figure, naturally slim but not thin, had been so carefully corseted that the eyes of all the young men present rested upon her with pleasure. Roger, relieved at his more comfortable situation, wondered what the scrutiny of the company had been like while it lasted. The expression of the hot staring faces resembled that of slowly gaping fish in an aquarium, nosing against the glass. But fish were silent—everything he could imagine was silent . . . Viola’s voice sounded gently in his ear. She had turned to him with obvious interest, and she seemed as relieved as he was to find some congenial company.

‘You ought to have been here to hear Teddy do “The Old Bachelor”. It was ripping!’

'It *must* have been,' lied Roger. 'Excuse me, but is that Mabel Amerson there, with the pink ribbon?'

'Oh,' pouted Miss Bright, but with an obliging archness. 'Yes, . . . that's . . . Kiddy, they call her. Somebody ought to tell her her hair's coming down. I expect you couldn't tell—thought it was a new way? . . . D'you *like* it that way?' She was teasing him, with quick eyes observing his expression and reaching after his temperament.

'It's delightful.'

'Now you're being . . .' Roger thought he had never met so surprisingly friendly a girl. 'D'you think she's pretty? Some people . . .'

'I haven't seen her for two or three years.'

'How absurd!' laughed Miss Bright. 'You're afraid to say. D'you see Mary—poor Mary?'

'No. Where?' Roger started. 'And why, poor? That's Mary with the coffee-cup, isn't it?'

'Mm.'

'Oh, *do* excuse me . . .'

Mary Amerson, looking seriously at the lapping waves of coffee in a cup, was coming slowly across the room. She was wearing a dress of very pale pink silk, and she looked charming, as Roger recognized with pleasure. In a manner, too, the moment was interesting, because Mary, having thought of the guests individually during the day, had watched especially for Roger. She had thought he might like a cup of coffee to warm him after what she felt must have been a chilly walk in the rain, and it was this cup which she carried. A visitor, or cousin, having told a good story to another visitor, was stepping back in order that he might have enough room to double up with laughter. He did not notice Mary; and the commonest of accidents occurred. The coffee spilled all down her frock, and there was a stricken silence. With an exclamation of annoyance Roger ran forward and caught the tottering cup. His handkerchief was used to spread the stain; and he had a glimpse of Mary's scarlet face and horrified eyes. The

visitor's laughter was so far on its way that it could not be checked; others near laughed also; but the girls exchanged glances. They shared Mary's bitterness of heart; to them this was tragedy: if it had happened to *their* best frock! Poor little Mary, too. She *did* look frightened.

'Awfully sorry,' said the visitor. He stood limply watching the damage, his laugh still hiccupping.

'You couldn't help it. . . . I ought to have looked,' Mary said.

'Elephant!' muttered Roger. 'Look here, Mary, hadn't you better skiddle and change your dress at once?'

'It's all very well to say that—everything's in such a muddle upstairs that I couldn't find a thing!' cried Mary. 'Roger—it *is* you? I'm so glad you came!'

Roger looked a little down at her, and knew that Mary, at least, was unchanged. In her coffee-carrying, in her very simple way of taking the blame for this accident, and in their mutual acceptance of the old relationship, Roger felt that she was exactly the same little girl that he had known, grown, perhaps more capable, but still ingenuous for her surroundings. And she was as fresh and pretty to his eyes as a rosebud.

'It's very jolly to see you,' he said. 'Who's that stuff for?'

'Goodness, I've forgotten!' Mary's eyes roved in search of the disappointed person; and then she laughed quietly, smoothing away a hair from her eyes. 'Of course, it was you. I'd been waiting for you to come. Are you cold?'

'Boiling.'

'Sure? There's plenty coffee.' She looked into his eyes very straight, in case he was being untruthful. 'It wouldn't be any trouble.'

'Really, I don't want it, thanks. I suppose you can't talk?'

'I put myself next to you at supper!' she said. 'Hope you don't mind. I don't expect I shall be there much!'

‘Good!’ Roger said, and nodded sharply. ‘I mean, that you should be there at all.’

The visitors looked at Mary, and then at Roger, and at both of them together, on such excellent terms of old acquaintance, and finally at each other. It was the breath of life to them.

‘Hn . . . She’s not a bit *upset*,’ they said. ‘*Likes* it, in fact. Nice looking boy. Who *is* he?’

VI

Mary had gone about her family’s business, and Roger had rejoined Viola Bright, in whose smile there was a touch of steel.

‘*Quite* finished?’ she asked. Roger clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth as he sat down.

‘I can’t understand why people jump about so,’ he said.

‘It’s very *upsetting*!’ laughed Viola. ‘Poor Mary—a—you know her rather well, don’t you?’

‘I used to—very. But why *poor*? That’s the second time.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ Viola said, with a sidelong glance of lightning. ‘She’s a dear little thing. They ——’ She checked herself, as she often did. It was her form of tact—to get so far with a speech as to make her meaning clear, and then to stop. It was not altogether intentional; sometimes it was quite unintentional; but it generally served. It frightened some people, and made them think she saw more than a nice girl should. One of the cousins said, ‘I don’t like that girl. . . . Think she’s catty,’ but that was because the cousin, thinking herself unobserved, had tried on Viola’s hat. Viola had picked up one of the other hats, and said, ‘I think *this* one would suit you,’ with an undercurrent of sarcasm which made the cousin smart under the insinuation that she was trying on all the hats of the evening. ‘If I’d known it was hers, I wouldn’t a touched it,’ the cousin said. Roger, on the subject of Mary, was too wise to

comment. He asked her, instead, if she knew everybody?

'I've been introduced,' she said demurely. 'You can't remember them.' In a lower voice, she added, surreptitiously, 'Even if you wanted to.'

'It's very difficult.'

'I s'pose *you* know a good many.'

'No. Very few. I'm rather afraid of meeting new people,' Roger admitted. He thought for a second, and then said, 'Perhaps you don't mind?'

Viola had got her lead. She felt she could go on talking to Roger without losing the strings of the conversation, except where, as must always happen, she touched too definitely on something upon which he thought it worth while to differ. With her, talk was a means of discovery, testing, and production; with him, she could tell, it was small change.

'Hate it. You *have* to . . . of course. I mean, people think you're—you know—proud, if you don't. Some . . . people think'—she looked over her shoulder and lowered her voice—'Grace's proud. D'you think she is?' Viola held her little handkerchief with delicate, fastidious fingers, and paused, listening.

'Oh—pride!' said Roger. 'I'm afraid I don't know.' He was looking across at Mary. Viola knew quite well where he was looking.

'Doesn't matter so much with a *fellow*. . . . People think differently about a girl. Girls have to be so careful not to make people think they're . . . stand-offish.'

'Do they?' Roger's manner was quite solemn as he expressed surprise. It was as though Viola were instructing him in the art of being a girl; and that, he felt, was something unteachable by mere exposition. He felt, further, very absurd, listening to her; but lethargic, almost that Viola's voice might softly lull him to sleep. It was very low and sweet. His round bird-like eyes saw everything with a sort of amused marvel. He found Viola completely

in her element, *tête-à-tête*, for just as some people shine in a crowd, or think of splendidly witty speeches in solitude, so Viola was triumphantly herself when she was alone with one other. And here—despite the babble, and the distant performances of pianoforte pieces and songs by inaudible cousins of ‘Sweet, chiming bells’ and ‘The Carnival,’—they were truly alone. One companion employed all her faculties; two people confused her mind so that she could not keep up with either. As the cousins would humorously have said, ‘Two’s company; three’s a crowd.’

‘Ah, you don’t know what it is to be a girl,’ she observed.

‘Don’t envy us,’ he urged. ‘You wouldn’t like to work in an office all day.’

‘Shouldn’t I?’ He shook his head with great vigour. ‘Well, I *do*.’

‘Do what?’

‘Work in an office. Look!’ She held up, very near his face, a delicate hand; and he saw that the nail of the middle finger was very slightly miscut, as though it had been broken.

‘Dear me,’ said Roger, for he recognized the sign-manual of the typist.

‘I get there at ten every morning,’ she said lightly, ‘I’m in the City. You’re in the West End, aren’t you? The same place as my brother. You’re in a better position than he is, though.’

‘Am I?’

‘Well, you’re private secretary to Mr. Cadman. He’s only in the counting-house. You’ll say a good word for him if you can, *won’t* you?’

‘Good word? Why, I go in fear of my life!’

‘O—oh! What a *fib*! Why, he says Mr. Cadman swears by you.’

Roger laughed at her, and at himself.

‘I think you must have mistaken the preposition. He means “at,”’ he suggested. He thought there was something crudely diabolic in her flattery, first by sex, then by

power. 'A pretty tale. Is that why you've been making handsome speeches to me?'

'Of *course* not!' Her eyes suggested another, and more flirtatious reason. 'As if I should. Still, if you can put in a word. . . . It might happen.' Her voice became practical. 'He *won't* speak for himself. I should be very grateful. I don't expect that matters to you. . . .'

'Ho, ho, ho, ho!' said Roger to himself. And to her, he said, 'I will suggest on Monday that he should be raised to the exalted rank of Lord High Executioner.'

Viola laid one hand upon his arm.

'Don't let him know I . . . *said* anything,' she said. 'He wouldn't . . . understand.'

'God bless my soul!' said Roger.

VII

Before they went in to supper, Viola had a moment's speech with her brother.

'Where are you going to sit?' she asked.

'They're all *labelled*,' he muttered.

'Oh, bother!'

'Get on all right with Dennett?' She nodded. 'What's he *like*?'

'Can't you tell for yourself? . . . silly boy.' She came closer to him. 'He's a great friend of Mary's—used to be. Don't forget!'

Bright's long face showed no change, but he looked at her closely.

'What do you mean?' he asked.

'Nothing.' Viola looked back again, also closely. 'Yes, you can look!' Bright turned his eyes away.

'Don't talk rubbish,' he said.

'See where Mary sits at supper.'

'What on *earth* does it matter to me where ——'

'Oh, doesn't it? I thought it did,' Viola said. 'That's all. My mistake.'

‘Don’t *manage*!’ He was not savage, but he was a little resentful of any interference in his business. This, it seemed to him, was gross interference. ‘Mind your own business, Vi.’

‘Hn. Sorry I spoke!’ she said. ‘Any way, you might notice.’

Bright could not take his eyes off Mary as she brought extra dishes to the table. His cold, immovable face seemed perfectly without emotion; but he watched her. It was not even in the way that he watched other people, but as though he *wanted* to see her do things: with others, he *waited* to see them do things. And he noticed that the chair beside Roger Dennett’s chair was vacant. Nobody took it. All the other chairs were filled. Viola was sitting opposite to Roger, and a cousin was on his right. Grace sat beside her fiancé, a man called Gower, with young prosperity written all over him; Mabel was self-consciously sitting beside Moggerson, half as though she did not know how she had got there, half as though the place was hers by right; and Mary was not yet seated. Mr. Amerson sat at the top of the table with a big joint of cold mutton before him (in case anybody wanted any more besides what had already been cut and served); Mrs. Amerson sat at the bottom of the table, with custards and jellies in enormous dishes within her reach—almost as though she were going to serve them, which all knew to be impossible. The hilarity of the company was as great as ever. One man had taken something away from a girl, and they were wrestling for its possession; other couples, such as Mabel and Moggerson, were on the verge of a rather supper-like affection; some others still sat, as they had through the evening, with their arms linked. And at last Septimus Bright saw that Mary had taken the vacant chair next to Roger Dennett.

VIII

When Mary sat next to Roger, it was with an anxious sense that more was yet to be done.

'It is a rush,' she said. 'Have you got all you want?'

'Exactly everything,' Roger said audaciously; but it was beyond her.

'Is your mother quite well?' There was a great clattering of knives and forks, and the sound of laughter. Teddy was pouring out beer for the men.

'Quite, thank you. And you?'

'Yes. . . . No, she wants the *mustard*, Jessie. Thanks. . . . Why haven't you been to see us, all this time?'

'Is that kind?' Roger asked. 'Aren't I to have any supper at all?'

'D'you mean there are so many reasons?' There was a shadow in her eyes, as she looked at him. 'I thought there could only be one.'

'Life is a very complex business,' he attempted to explain, regardless of the clamour that was deafening him.

'No, no, Roger!' She was pleading with him. 'I wish you *had* come. Was it . . . was it that you didn't like us any more?'

'You girls are so *direct*,' he grumbled, and coloured. He glanced at his other neighbour. 'You know I like *you*, Mary? Do you?'

'I know you used to like us all,' she said quietly. It was delightful to him to see the delicacy of her ear, and her face half turned away. But he was a little exasperated with her.

'Don't you think we're *all* changing—except you?' he next asked. 'I like a great many people; but I'm not prepared to say exactly how they shall be treated in order of liking; and I don't think you ought to put me . . . to ask how much I like your brothers and sisters. Won't it do if I say that I've often wanted to see you, but hadn't the courage to come and call?'

'Yes. I was morbid,' she announced, calmly.

'Mary!' he said, exasperated afresh. 'You were no such thing. You were only more frank than people generally are. But if I were equally frank you'd be hurt.'

'Go on,' she said, quivering. They seemed in a little pool, quite by themselves, away from the others.

'If I said I liked you, and that I liked the others in their way, would *that* hurt you?'

'Of course,' she said. Roger's shoulders lifted very slightly.

'Well, there you are. Why is that?'

'Oh,' said Mary. 'If you like one . . . I mean, we're all . . .'

'You mean,' he whispered relentlessly, 'that you *must* hang together.' She nodded. 'Now, look here, my child, will you come and see my mother?'

'Not if I mayn't bring Mabel,' she said, her loyalty aroused, and her cheeks pink.

'If you can *bring* Mabel?' he urged. 'Bring her by all means.'

'I should like to come!'

'Without Mabel?'

'Well . . .' She saw he was laughing. 'Yes, I should like to come,' she said.

IX

After supper, the dancing began, and Mary had to pack up the dishes, so Roger went home. The rain had ceased, and he walked, in his stale wet cap and overcoat, feeling prickly with the unbearable garments. The roads were still wet, but the moon, shining down, showed that the centres of the paving-stones were drying. Roger saw the moon behind the shivering skeletons of bare trees, and something in its extraordinary paleness made him shudder. He was feeling that here the white face of the moon rose like an image of truth, clear and candid, while behind him he had left people in the last stages of enjoyment, like flies still kicking in a mess of sticky preserve. Nothing, to Roger, could be more horrible than this. Poverty, disgrace, failure, despair, these were clear images, even as the moon was; there was something which at any rate provoked pure

contrast with an ideal, distinct and perceptible. But the futility, the hopeless stickiness of an Amerson party, in Roger's eyes, seemed to make the whole family as undignified and sprawling as a cage of puppies in a dog-shop, blindly pawing each other, nestling one within the other, until somebody pointed a finger and said 'That one, please.'

Of course, Roger was exceptional. Just as his body was fresh and alert from his daily cold bath and his regular exercise, so his mind was both healthy and fastidious. He disliked grease and stickiness so passionately that the words were used, in his vocabulary, to describe the most objectionable things he knew; and the Amerson party made him feel bilious.

'And that poor kid stewing in it!' he said. 'And thinking she likes it!' Well, there was a point, which he did not see. It is very customary for people of artistic pretensions to say nowadays, 'He *doesn't* like it; he only *thinks* he likes it,' because they wish to retain their respect for the person they accuse of muddle-headedness. But that is a double-edged sword, because it is better to be wrong than to be muddle-headed and very likely wrong as well. Still Roger declared for Mary's muddle-headedness with the best intentions, and he was very heated with the party, and angry with the Amersons, and uncomfortable in his overcoat and cap. Whether his final ejaculation to the moon was justifiable is another matter.

'I'll never,' he said, stopping short, and raising his hand to the moon. 'I'll never enter that rotten house again!'

X

The cousins were churning; those who were to stay the night were kissing or pretending that they wanted to kiss, or that they had nearly been about to kiss the cousins who were to seek their own house. There was a *melée* upon the doorstep, and cries of 'No, it's stopped raining,' and 'Quite a fine night,' and 'Be good!' and 'Don't forget

to write!’ Teddy was overtaken by a humorous fit of crying, which sent some of the girl-cousins hiccupping along the road; and then those who remained withdrew again into the house, breathing deeply, and exclaiming, ‘Oh, isn’t it *hot* in here!’ Grace never left off talking to her fiancé, who lived down the road; but Mabel had parted from Moggerson a few steps outside the gate. She had been crushed against him in the press of people, but that was only part of the fun; and their two warm damp right hands had clasped, as Browning said:

Just as long as friends’ may
Or so very little longer.

The family watched this with quite an innocent pleasure. They said he was very comical, which was a high compliment. It almost put him on the same level as Teddy.

Now all this time, nobody had seen very much of Tom Amerson, the eldest of the five children; but Tom had been, for the most part, with his father, talking family business and what was called just ‘business’. The fact that he was in his father’s firm—or rather, was employed by the firm which also employed his father—gave him a dignity in the family councils; and Tom was inclined to treasure his privilege. ‘I was talking to Father,’ he would say, ‘about business.’ He had had some whisky and a cigar, and had stood talking to the uncles, so that he had heard all about Aunt Minnie’s illness, and how business was bad all round, and how money was driven out of the country. ‘I think you’re wrong there, Uncle,’ he had said, when they were discussing the Zollverein. ‘No, really . . . I’ll just look it up in my Chambers’s. Pardon me.’ His return with a volume had been wholly a triumph. The uncles, who were mostly mild, had subsequently deferred to him, half-laughingly. ‘Have to be careful,’ they laughed, ‘with Tom about.’ Possibly Mrs. Amerson heard more about Aunt Minnie’s illness than anybody else, and, indeed, nobody could have given the details so exactly as Aunt Minnie herself, from

whom Mrs. Amerson had them. But the girls knew it all next day, from their mother. They also heard all the other ailments which had been accomplished by various members of the family since their last meeting, and Mrs. Amerson had nearly sent one cousin home crying by saying she looked consumptive, and feeling her chest, and saying it ought to have been better covered. 'It *was* rather an awful thing to say, Mother,' Grace said, in extenuation. 'Girl had no right,' observed Mrs. Amerson, 'to . . .' Mary hastened from the room, because when her mother became physiological, she seemed to become like the papers illustrated with unpleasant photographs, which Tom and Teddy had left lying about in their younger days.

And at last the family had made up its mind to go to bed. The cousins went up one by one, or two by two, or in bunches, with great laughter. The boys were to sleep downstairs, Grace, Mabel, and Mary in the room generally occupied by Mary (it being the smallest), and the rest to be sprinkled, always decorously, about the house. It was quite at the end of the evening that Grace caused a tornado.

'I *must* say,' she remarked, 'that I thought Mary was very wrong to put herself next to Roger Dennett at supper. . . .'

'Why shouldn't she?' asked Mary, faintly pink.

'Well, it's rather like throwing yourself at him,' Grace said.

'Throw ——!' Mary grew white. 'Grace, what do you mean?'

'Children, children,' pacifically urged Mrs. Amerson.

'No, I want to know what she *means*!' persisted Mary, shaking violently with anger.

'I noticed it myself,' said Tom. 'Everybody noticed it.'

Mary went out of the room without another word. She went right out to the garden, with her fists clenched and jerking together; and no tears came. Her father, when he went to lock up at the back of the house, found her stand-

ing white and tearless, and called her in. At first she refused, but when he bade her not to be childish, she came, and went upstairs. If any other room had been vacant she would not have slept with her sisters that night. It was a bitter comment upon her distress that even the bathroom was occupied. She stood about on the stairs, trembling, knowing that she must go up to the room where Grace was. It was always like that! If she ever felt inclined to revolt against a thing said or done, the unalterable usage of the house forced her to disperse her anger or her resentment before a meal-time, or before some routine happening. She could not say here, 'I *won't* go upstairs,' because she knew she would have to do so. She was cramped and held, and even her emotion was made inglorious and stained with pettiness. The house was all dark, and jovial voices came hubble-bubbling from the rooms. Very slowly Mary went to the top floor, where her little room was. A candle was blowing in a draught from the chimney, but they had closed the window, which Mary always left open. The others were already in bed, and their voices died away as she came in and shut the door, standing against its yellow paint in her disfigured pink dress. Mabel, turning her head, tittered very slightly; and as Mary commenced to take her dress off, Grace said, in her contemptuously-amused elder-sister voice:—

'I was only talking for your own good, Mary.'

'Be quiet,' cried Mary. 'How *dare* you.' She was madly, passionately angry.

'Silly little juggins,' Grace said, coldly.

'I never heard of such a thing . . . I never *heard* of such a thing!' Mary said to herself almost hysterically, and the blood seemed to rush to her face. She lay very quiet in bed, trying not to touch Grace; and she did not cry. She was too proud to cry now, with the others there; but she felt that she could have killed Grace.

CHAPTER III

THE AMERSONS

I

ON Sunday, the Amersons arose late, and ate a long breakfast, all the cousins feeling rather stale after the noise of the previous evening. They filtered away during the morning, or after the three o'clock dinner of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, or even after tea, with many expressions of thanks for their entertainment; and the family, equally bored, then sat yawning about the house until bedtime. Grace's fiancé, Gower, came in the afternoon, and Grace and he sat together over on the sofa. Gran'ma was very close to the fire, looking at the flames, and thinking in her dim old mind of things half-forgotten and saddened in the length of years. Mrs. Amerson dozed in an arm-chair, pretending that she was still reading a book; Mabel was sitting stiffly in another chair, reading; Mary was still washing the dinner-things. Teddy had gone out; Tom was in his room reading Macaulay's 'History of England'. They all felt a passive distaste for each other, as though each could just bear the others in the room, but could not bear to look at them. Grace and Gower were nearly half-asleep, for they had nothing further to say to one another, and were content to lean together in ordinary affection. Only Gran'ma kept her vigil, hardly winking, acting again the faded romances of her youth, her mouth sometimes moving in a vain endeavour to make the scene more vital, often just staring into the fire like the tired old friendless woman she was. The fire hissed and fluttered, and every now and then collapsed in some part, so that Mrs. Amerson was startled awake, murmuring. . . .

Mary came into the room while they sat in the ugly chairs in the ugly room, and although she was too familiar with the room, and too unaccustomed to any other kind of room, to feel actively distressed at its brownness and its middle-age, she looked at the drowsy figures with dumb opposition rising in her breast. Outside, the bare grey November evening was closing in, so that the firelight grew each moment more noticeable in the picture; and a sudden dream of pity came into her mind at the sight of Gran'ma's bent figure, sitting still unconscious that the door had been so quietly opened. Mary did not know that her feeling towards Gran'ma was what she would have felt for some crippled bird, but it had no human quality; it was what some people feel for the dumb and inarticulate—a pity that apes love, that becomes passionate in excess, that relies entirely for its nutrition upon the impossibility of establishing relations otherwise than by signs. Mary was always sympathetic with Gran'ma; she was never impertinently indulgent, as Grace was; but she loved her only as something old and rather helpless: she could not love her as she might have loved her mother. There was too much disparity between them for their relations to have the glow of mutual intercourse. Yet Gran'ma was very kind to her, putting out a withered grey hand and touching hers, or looking with vacant eyes at her across the hearthrug, or from her pillow—like an animal that is very ill, and trusting the one who tends it. Gran'ma did, in her way, love Mary much more than Mary loved Gran'ma, because Gran'ma loved only Mary and her own son, Jerrard. She could remember him from the time he was born, and the knowledge of that made her too exacting and querulous when he was present. Mary knew that her father never pretended to love his mother; he never pretended nowadays to love anybody, she thought. He was always abrupt in his talk, and his impatience with his wife was almost as painful as her resentment of it and her ill-timed attempts to re-assert herself. Mary could not see that old Mrs.

Amerson, with her fading, had ceased gradually to be the mother he remembered; but she knew that he was uncomfortable in her presence, and eager to be out of it. She had thought indignantly to herself, 'As though he was afraid of infection!' And that helped to make her sorry for Gran'ma; yet her relations with Gran'ma were always stilted, half-strange, as they would have been with somebody scarcely known, to whom she was under an obligation.

If Gran'ma had not been so old, confidences might have been possible; but their sole ground of association was a distrust of Mrs. Amerson. Gran'ma had always distrusted her daughter-in-law; and Mary was bound to feel, as she said to herself, 'a little provoked with Mamma,' and, from experience, uncertain what indiscreet thing Mrs. Amerson would next do. Gran'ma would simply have said: 'The woman's a fool,' but a certain survival of tact restrained her, and she said nothing. She rarely said anything, and lived almost entirely in her dreams and her silent disapproval. Tom and Teddy never spoke to her—never took any notice of her until she had spoken twice; Grace patronized her; Mabel very unwillingly spoke to her, and always said the wrong thing; Mrs. Amerson complained of various things and related the sicknesses of other people. Gran'ma's memory was stored with sicknesses, and things better than sicknesses; she had never been interested in them, and believed such an interest as Mrs. Amerson's was the sign of a small mind. It took an hour's gazing into the fire to quieten her faint indignation. But she never became openly intolerant, except when she turned away her head, or welcomed a diversion. It all seemed pretty much the same to Gran'ma; for her own sickness was that she had outlived her son's affection and the interest of those around her. She had even outlived her own interest, since her mind played always with the things of the past, and never at all with those things which were to happen. Yet her daughter-in-law and her grandchildren, who thought only of the present, were not unlike her in their disregard of the future.

II

Mary had far too many things to think about during the day to give more than a few moments' active thought to Grace's attitude of the previous evening; but although she had slept, it had been from sheer exhaustion, and when the cousins at length had taken their departure, she was free once again to remember her wrong. To have spoken to Roger, in an impulsive way, that was her first fault. To have looked forward to his coming, and, in a moment of impulse, to have moved some one of the cousins from his side in order that he might talk to her, was the second. If it had happened accidentally, nobody would have blamed her; but it had not so happened. 'It does seem hard,' she thought, 'that after all the work . . . ' It came to her to look at it in this way: if her family saw the act to be so wrong, what must Roger have thought? She was sure he had not misunderstood her: he had said she was too frank, and he had suggested that she was too loyal. Roger *did* understand . . . he couldn't think her so horrible. How, then, was it that Grace had misunderstood? Why was it that . . . ? She did not dare for some time to question Mabel's conduct. It was understood that Moggerson was in love with Mabel; it was a matter of course that she should be put next to him at table, though Mary had shrunk from it as being vulgar. She couldn't bear even to consider such a comparison. The more she looked at it, the more she felt herself injured by being thought capable of such vulgar indiscretion by her sisters. Mabel had not said anything, of course, but she had tittered when Grace said something low in her ear, and Mary had known bitterly what that was.

Over and over again Mary was made to remember it. They did not seem to mind the idea that she should plan to marry Roger; what they minded was her indiscretion in appearing to do so. It was not the indelicacy of the

object that they condemned; it was a failure in tactics. Yet Mary, in spite of her constant association with them, would never have dreamed that her action could be so misconstrued. Why couldn't she, if she wanted to, speak to Roger? All her flying thoughts centred upon Mabel. If Mabel had not been perfectly simple . . . Well, how was it that she, Mary, had gained the impression that Moggerson wanted to marry Mabel? He was often at the house, it was true, but he might have come to see Ted, or Tom . . . 'Might?' her sisters would have said. There had been, she remembered, jokes about Moggerson's hands, or feet, and Mabel had grown red, as though the joke had been at herself. . . . That had been the beginning. Afterwards, it had been difficult to remember that they were not engaged. Mrs. Amerson had told Moggerson what a good, quiet girl Mabel was . . . a good housekeeper. . . . 'Why,' Mary said scornfully to herself, 'If I'd been a man, I should have run away!' The truth was that Mabel was so much better than that. Mary knew some of Mabel's faults: she was rather lazy and very sentimental, keeping treasures and mementoes still which recorded schoolgirl trysts; she had once or twice told unnecessary lies, giving false reasons for going out, and using other subterfuges of a like nature. But she was kind and good. Mary took it for granted that she must marry somebody. They had all agreed, years ago, on the horrors of an old maidish life, and Mary, at least, had looked forward to marrying, and caring for beautiful children with blue eyes and black hair; but this was different. This was more like a horrible intrigue. And Grace! Mary despised Mr. Gower, because he took vinegar with everything; yet Grace simply said: 'We shall be very well-off,' and talked about what she would do after she was married in the Spring. 'She's selfish . . . horrible!' Mary exclaimed to herself, as she stood in the kitchen, waiting for more hot water.

III

'What are you going to wear Thursday?' Mabel asked on Monday morning, interrupting Mary's solitary communings. 'Can't wear your pinkie, can you?'

'Thursday?' Mary could not remember the occasion.

'Ted's concert. *You* know. He's going to take us.'

'Oh yes. I don't know. Must we? Of course we must. I'll think.'

'Bert Moggerson's going.' Mabel moved self-consciously. 'I said we'd be there.'

'Is he going to sing?'

'I don't know why he's going!' Mabel tossed her head. 'I'm getting tahr'd of him.'

'Mabel!'

'Well, not reely. He . . . dint say a word at supper. *Asked* him if he was ill. He said "No". He was sulky about something. Something'd upset him. Silly old fossil. All because I let Archie hold my hand in one of the games. He dint like Roger calling me "Mabel". "Who's that?" he said. "Why does he call you Mabel?" I said . . . because he was a cousin . . . just for a game, you know. He said, "Oh, no he's not, because Ted introduced him to me." I said, "Oo, I'll ask him to call me some other name." He dint like that.'

Mary moved restlessly.

'Roger's . . . '

'Wasn't old Grace waxy about him! I did laugh when she started on you. You were a silly to do it.'

'Mabel, I don't want to talk about it. It seems to me horrible to talk like that.'

'Well, he's got very good-looking. I don't know but what I won't flirt a little with him, to make Bert mad. Be rather fun. . . . Don't expect he'd look at *me*, though.'

'I don't know what you mean; and you're making me wish I . . . '

There was a knock at the front door, and when Mary

went, she saw that the caller was a girl about thirteen, with a round face surmounted by a large white straw-hat. The girl held a note, addressed to Mary.

‘DEAR MARY,’ it ran. ‘Roger tells me you half promised to come and see me. I should be so glad if you would. You know that owing to my husband’s health I very seldom go out; but if you would come—say this afternoon?—I should be very pleased to see you. And your sisters as well, if they would care to come. Edith will bring a verbal answer if I am to expect you to-day. Yours sincerely, L. DENNETT.’

That was how Roger forced Mary’s hand.

IV

So Mary went to Highgate, to tea with Mrs. Dennett, and she saw Mr. Dennett and Edith, and she stayed talking. Mr. Dennett sat in an arm-chair, so that at a first glance nobody would have thought there was anything the matter with him. Yet his right side had been paralysed as the result of an accident a month after Edith was born, and the sudden stoppage of his father’s activities had made it necessary that Roger should at once leave school and begin to earn his own living. Mr. Dennett had turned to journalism, for the higher kind of which his wide knowledge of literature and a considerable literary gift had fitted him; and the family, although made poor, was enabled to survive and to live in peace. It was perhaps characteristic of British suburbia that when anybody spoke of Mr. Dennett’s work, no comment was made upon its quality or its kind. The remark commonly made was, ‘Writes it all with his left hand!’ so that Mr. Dennett, in his way, took rank with people who paint with their feet and waggle their ears. Mary, having only heard this fact about him, felt rather at a loss on seeing Mr. Dennett, and was almost afraid to approach. He, however, put out his left hand, and called her by her Christian name.

'I think you know Edie,' he said, holding his daughter a little to him.

'I don't think she remembers me.' Mary spoke as though Edie were five, instead of thirteen.

'I remember you quite well,' Edith said, in her distinct voice. 'I've often seen you.'

'In that case, you should show a little more cordiality,' suggested Mr. Dennett.

'I feel perfectly friendly to her,' explained Edith. 'But I don't know what she likes to talk about.'

Mary grew a little embarrassed.

'I . . . I like to talk about anything,' she began.

'Ah, Roger says that's risky. He says people can only talk properly about one thing.'

Mary wondered what that could be.

'Doesn't it seem a pity to . . . wait for that thing?' Mary asked. 'Won't you tell me what *your* topic is?'

'Oh . . . myself!' Edith said simply.

Mary grew pink, because she saw Roger behind it all, like an amused imp.

'He is a wretch!' she said. Mr. Dennett laughed outright; but Edith looked seriously at them, waiting for an opportunity to discuss her topic. She was fortunately prevented from taking advantage of it, when it came, by the re-entry of Mrs. Dennett.

'Come and talk to me, Mary,' she said. 'I expect you're tired after your party.'

'Do you *like* parties?' Edith inquired, becoming suddenly conversational. 'Don't they make you tired? I've grown ou ——'

'Not quite *that* sort of party, Edie.'

'I don't mean a children's party, Mamma. I just wondered if Mary liked parties. Roger says it's a question of temper.'

Mary was aghast! Did Roger dislike parties? Swiftly, the question came, did she really like parties herself?

'They're a great deal of trouble,' she said. 'And very noisy. I had an accident to my frock.'

'We heard. . . . We were very sorry,' said Mrs. Dennett.

'Oh, it must have been *awful*,' Edith supplemented.

Mary thought: no member of her own family had expressed sorrow. They had said, 'What a nuisance!' Mrs. Amerson had said, 'Oh dear, what a careless girl you *are*.'

'It's a tremendous great stain,' she explained, somewhat exulting in their pity.

'I was afraid . . . when Roger said he'd dabbed it.'

'He was very kind.' Mrs. Dennett smiled at Mary's continual production of a loyalty of some kind. 'Nobody else came to help.' Edith interfered at this point.

'Roger's very officious,' she said. 'Always.'

Mrs. Dennett had grey hair, although she was not old, and grey eyes. Her cheeks were so smooth that nobody would have supposed that she had lived through great trouble. And her attitude towards Edith was like Roger's attitude. Mary knew nothing like it; in her own house they had no time for attitudes. If it be true that individuals and families have their own rhythm and time (in the musical sense) then the Dennetts must have resembled a minuet, and the Amersons a sort of rag. But the Amersons were all in need of a conductor, for they did not make a harmony of their own. She wondered if the Dennetts ever quarrelled.

'Oh, I don't think so,' Mary said.

'He always has his own way. . . . He teases me,' Edith proceeded to explain.

'Well, who could help it, my dear?' asked Mr. Dennett.

'D'you think I'm . . . ?'

'Sh, sh, sh,' Mrs. Dennett just managed to check her daughter, fairly launched upon her favourite topic. 'You're getting terribly egoistical, Edith. You should reveal yourself in actions, and leave exposition to others.'

'I should like to have known what she was,' Mary thought to herself.

Presently Edith went to get the tea, and Mr. Dennett busied himself with some work, and Mary and Mrs. Dennett talked quietly together at the other side of the room.

V

They talked so long, after tea, that Mary was still there when Roger came home. This was painful to her: Grace would think it intentional—would think she had stayed purposely. The thought coloured her cheeks. Yet she was so comfortable in this warm, quiet room, with no mother to come wailing in, and no boys to be tired and grumpy. She gave a sigh of regret.

‘I must go,’ she said.

‘Indeed you mustn’t,’ Mrs. Dennett assured her.

‘Sit where you are!’ said Roger.

‘The idea!’ cried Edith. ‘Roddie, have you brought me . . . what you promised?’

‘Yes, but you mustn’t play it now.’

‘I want to look!’ Edith disappeared from the room, and returned with a roll. ‘Oh, oh . . . five sharps!’ she cried. ‘How frightful.’ She examined the music, and showed it to Mary.

‘Mary used to play it,’ Roger said.

Edith and Mary adjourned to the next room, to try the music.

‘I’m glad you asked her, Roger,’ Mrs. Dennett said quietly. ‘She’s a charming girl. Her mother must be a dreadful old thing . . .’

‘Not a word,’ said Roger. ‘We’re not fairies, you know. Besides, what can we *do*? Simply *nothing*!’

‘No . . . but I should like to help her, all the same.’ Mrs. Dennett was a woman, and she ignored impossibilities.

‘Old Mr. Amerson came into the office to-day—on business of course. He started talking about Ted. You know he’s at our place? Most curious, the old man is. He’s

very ill, I think. *They* don't see it. He's getting very serious and bitter. . . .'

'She doesn't say a grumbling word; but they must be demoralizing,' Mrs. Dennett went on, following her own train of thought. 'Is Grace the one you dislike so much? But there, I expect they're all tiresome to each other.'

'It's a menagerie, Mother. You know those things they used to have at the seaside with several miserable unlikely animals cooped in a little cage? Happy families, they called them.'

'All very starved,' Mrs. Dennett nodded. 'Poor things!'

'Exactly like that. Though it's rotten to say such things with Mary in the next room.'

'At least, she's not like the others, is she? She can't be like those you've described.'

'Mother, she was born in the cage.'

Mrs. Dennett grew like a medicine-woman. Her soft cheeks seemed to become firm, and her eyes to look into infinity.

'Then she must be let out,' she said. 'That's all I can say.'

'Yes, Mother. But *how?*' Roger asked.

VI

By being at the Dennetts' Mary avoided a peculiar scene. Bert Moggerson went to call on the Amersons. He wanted to see Teddy about Thursday's affair, as he explained to Mabel, who opened the door. They went into the sitting-room, and Moggerson sat down, with his fingers inside his collar, trying to stretch it. Mabel remained standing by the fire, and the leaping flames lighted up her plump tender face and showed her foot resting upon the fender. He thought she drooped a little in his company . . . Mabel thought so, too.

'Yes-a . . . I thought I'd just run in and see him,' Moggerson said.

'I don't know *when* he'll be home. . . . It's cold isn't it?'

'Beas'ly. You're coming Thursday, aren't you?' He looked at her sidelong, shrewdly appraising.

'Perhaps,' Mabel said softly. 'It all depends on Mary.'

'Why?' he pressed, a strange thickness in his voice.

'Oh, I coont come . . . if *she* dint . . . ' Mabel said, very softly, glancing back at him.

'*Why* not?' asked Moggerson. '*Why* not?'

'Oh . . . cos girls . . . I couldn't . . . '

'I don't see why not,' Moggerson argued. 'I don't see it. Ted'll be there . . . I don't see why you couldn't come. . . . '

'Well, I'll *see*,' Mabel said.

'What I mean,' Moggerson said, 'if it's a question of . . . I mean, a question of takin' *care* of you . . . I mean, a . . . '

Grace came into the room.

'Isn't *Mary* . . . Oh, I *beg* your pardon!' She withdrew hastily, leaving Mabel crimson, and Moggerson trembling. It had been too glaring. She had *too* obviously beaten a vulgar panic-stricken retreat, in order that they should be left alone. There was a long silence. Moggerson sat still, blinking, his little eyes with a strange light in them.

'Oh, well—a . . . Perhaps it isn't hardly worth waiting for Teddy,' he said. 'I'll ring him up on the 'phone to-morrow . . . I . . . got some work to do to-night. . . . ' He rose, and went toward the door.

'I'm sorry he's not in,' Mabel said, in an unsteady voice, following him, with her eyes averted.

'Well, goo'-bye, Miss Amerson.' His hand was on the door.

Outside, in the cold air, Moggerson's thoughts grew clear. Hn, he said to himself. That was pretty straight, eh? Yes, there waddent much mistaking that. Never much cared for that eldest one . . . she was snobby, bouncin' into the room like that. Well, he could see what that

meant, eh? 'Oh, I *beg* your pardon,' she'd said. There waddent much mistaking that. . . . He could see what that meant, clear enough. They didn't . . . they hadn't got any *objection* to him. Oh no! Yes, by Jove! that was pretty. . . . But not for Bertie Moggerson, eh? He must be careful he didn't make a fool of himself. He shook his head knowingly, and talked aloud, like a dotard.

VII

Roger and Mary walked back through the chill air, but they were quite warm and comfortable. They could see everything sharply, for the air at the top of Highgate was so clear that all outlines were intensified; and their steps echoed. Mary looked around her at the old-fashioned shops, against a vision of Kentish Town Road at night, with its crowds and its haggling market.

'It *is* pretty,' she said. It was remarkable that a few hours with the Dennetts had made her fear of Roger's misunderstanding quite a thin mist, and she talked with him as frankly as she would have done if Grace had not made the scene. She had fallen back from her imposed maturity and suspiciousness, into her old thought of everything as beautiful.

'Nice old place,' Roger said. 'It is just old enough to be charming.'

'Are you going to the concert on Thursday?' she next asked. No, it seemed that he had not heard of it, but that even if he had he could not or would not have gone. 'Mabel and I are going,' she said. 'Don't you like concerts any better than parties?' Roger started. Girls were such *devils* at guessing, he found.

'I like them both about the same,' he said suavely. 'Don't you?'

Mary bit her lip.

'I'm very fond of both,' she said defiantly. 'I think it's right to be . . . I think it's wrong *never* to be a little gay.'

‘Quite true.’

‘You *know* you hate them,’ she said in a little aggrieved voice.

‘Oh, Mary! It depends on the people I see at either,’ he said. ‘And you are making me like Edith, who talks about herself.’ But he was disquieted.

‘Nothing else is worth talking about. There’s nothing else to talk about, except parties and concerts. Nothing ever happens.’ Mary was saddened with the thought that he despised her pleasures.

‘To walk from Highgate to Kentish Town is a happening,’ he said. Mary was silent. ‘What are they going to do at the concert?’ She had no idea. She told him that Teddy was to recite, and Jerdow was to sing. And added that Bert Moggerson was going. He shuddered, but so secretly that she did not see; and expressed the hope that she would enjoy the concert.

‘I hoped you might be coming,’ she said, ingenuously. ‘But of course there will be several of us going, and Teddy will be there, and I expect it will be very boring to anybody who goes a lot to professional concerts, and doesn’t care for amateurs who only do the same things as professionals, but not so well because they haven’t the time to practise, or perhaps haven’t the same ability. . . .’ At last she stopped, breathless, hoping that she had covered her first thoughtlessness.

‘I might try and look in during the evening,’ Roger said. ‘But . . .’

‘Oh no . . . I really don’t mean that . . . I meant that I *had* thought . . .’ began Mary, crimson. ‘You make me seem so . . .’

‘I’m trying to pick up again where we left off,’ Roger submitted, looking a little down at her as she increased her pace.

‘We’re grown up,’ she said. ‘It was thoughtless of me . . .’

‘But you were quite ready to do that on Saturday?’

he asked. Mary was in a corner. Nothing would have induced her to confide her humiliation. They turned into Dartmouth Park Hill, which is both roughly paved and dark at the upper end. 'Won't you go on?'

'I'd forgotten,' she said. 'I was so glad to see you. I'd been thinking of you as you were.'

'And now somebody has told you that you can't be friends without people talking?' Mary did not answer; her cheeks were burning, and her eyes were full of tears. 'That was rather officious of them, as Edie would say. I tell you, Mary, I'm just *sick* of these tin-pot notions of suburban propriety. Perhaps I *shouldn't* tell you?' She made no answer. 'Well, it's a great pity. Isn't it? . . . Don't you wish exciting things would happen suddenly? An earthquake?' He withdrew, thinking that he was taking too much for granted.

'Nothing ever happens,' she said again. And then, suddenly, 'Roger, I'm so afraid of anything happening.'

VIII

They walked on, talking quietly. At last, they came to Marjorie Road; but Roger refused to enter No. 43.

'Shall I come to the concert?' he asked, mischievously.

'No, Roger,' Mary said. They parted, without further words. Mary went into the house, and into the sitting-room to find Mabel red-eyed and crying, and Grace elaborately reading a book, with an expression upon her face that struggled between disdain and regret.

'Whatever's the matter?' Mary inquired. 'Are you hurt, Mabel?'

'She—she came into the room . . . and now he's g-gone!' wailed Mabel, looking and speaking exactly like her mother.

'Mabel—it's absurd to make a scene!' Grace said, frigidly. 'I've said I'm sorry—but how was *I* to know he

was here? I was looking for you, Mary. You *have* been a time. I suppose Roger Dennett was there?’

‘Yes,’ Mary answered, with a sort of cool, angry impertinence. ‘Roger walked home with me. I think you must be very stupid, Grace, to upset Mabel like this.’

‘I *really* don’t know what my sisters are coming to,’ Grace said, rising. ‘I’m thankful that I’m leaving them in two or three months . . .’

‘It’s j—just as well for us!’ grizzled Mabel. ‘Great selfish, clumsy beast!’

Grace slammed the door.

CHAPTER IV

'GENERAL PUBLISHERS'

I

THE ideas current regarding the publishing trade in England are very general and vague, and it is confused in the minds of many otherwise intelligent folk with the retail stationery and bookselling businesses, both new and second-hand. Just as dentists are sometimes required to advise on general medical affairs, and theologians on points of mystical religion, so the publisher is confused with his indirectly-allied brethren. Of old, it is true, publishers were also booksellers, because in the eighteenth century, booksellers were publishers by a process of co-operation with other booksellers; but more recently the trades have become distinct. Publishers sell only their own wares; booksellers have arisen as a class of middlemen, generally condemned by the public and by the publishers alike. More than one publisher regards the 'trade' as composed of rascals who secrete his books and do not show them to buzzing customers; and more than one publisher speaks of his 'clientele,' by which he means a section of the community which buys his books for the sake of the publisher rather than for the stuff that is contained within the books he publishes. On the other hand, the general public complains that booksellers do not know their business, because they cannot immediately supply particular books, or because they cannot say off-hand who did this, and who wrote that, and which is the best edition to buy of a classic author's work. The author, if he happen to be alive, regards the entire machinery for disposing of his works as

defective and outworn. Critics and publishers combine in talking about 'the ruck,' and about the small quantity of modern books which have any stamina; but all these questions are purely professional, whereas the conflicting charges unite in a general charge, which spares nobody, of amateurishness.

The offices of Tremlett & Grove, who described themselves as 'general publishers' and omitted to publish works of poetry and drama, were in Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, in the very heart of the publishing world. On hot summer days, the nearness of Covent Garden Market was betrayed to the nostrils of Messrs. Tremlett & Grove's employees as well as to the strolling players who met each other in search of 'shops' down Bedford Street, and in Maiden Lane, which runs at the back of Henrietta Street. In winter, Tremlett & Grove sold their books, and expressed opinions as to the state of the publishing trade. But neither Tremlett nor Grove had ever existed; the names were, so to speak, a symbol, although they suggested nothing; and the real proprietor of the firm was an aged lady who owned most of her husband's share in the business, and who trusted implicitly in her minor partner and manager, Mr. Cadman. Mr. Cadman was, to all seeming, Tremlett & Grove; his policy controlled the firm, and his huge body was the one for which authors, artists, wholesale stationers, printers, book-binders, and even advertising agents lay in wait. Mr. Cadman was exactly fifty years old; he seemed to have been very rarely to school, but he had acquired deportment (most necessary in a publisher) and he looked like a walrus. Among his friends, he was said to resemble a Viking, a word which they all mispronounced. He sat in his beautiful large office and controlled affairs as comfortably as any Cabinet Minister. Clerks were all around him; he had two typists, several packers, a cashier, and innumerable young men who worked for farcical salaries to keep his books in a state of semi-muddle. Things called 'queries,' from bitterly ironic booksellers in the Midlands,

scorched the life out of these clerks and left them quivering with prickly heat, because of all things on earth Mr. Cadman dreaded most these scathing suggestions of incompetence. He would turn on a clerk and rend him; he would be transformed from a Viking into something far more painful than a dogfight; his clerk would feel maimed and bruised like a mouse which has escaped from a cat at the last gasp.

But Mr. Cadman was not always like this. He had several 'manners'. Ladies found him charming, men only less so. He could understand anger, and he could respect intelligence. That was why he liked Roger Dennett, who stood up to him and with whom he never quarrelled. It was a part of his natural cunning that he never blamed Roger for making mistakes; he knew that Roger was so loyal, and so hard-working, that silence punished him far better than anger. Besides that, he was wise enough to know that mistakes are inevitable, and Roger, imitating a famous schoolboy-comment on a great head-master, said: 'He's a beast; but he's a just beast'. And although, in common with nearly every publisher in London, Mr. Cadman knew nothing about literature, he had a hard, keen commercial sense, except when his sentimentality overthrew him. He would make a good bargain; he would produce his books in a style to make angels despair; but he made few obvious mistakes. Failures he had, of course, but not cringing failures. Sometimes he would tire of a book before it appeared, and would push it out shamefacedly; but he had not reached that state of timidity that leads some publishers to suppose that no books ever sell. He enjoyed above all things seeing another publisher fail with a book he had rejected. 'Proves I'm right,' he said. 'Oh, I knew. . . .' Every morning he would go through the orders in silence. Roger used sometimes to hear him whistle when the School Board or some provincial school ordered an aged tottering book; and sometimes Mr. Cadman would throw down the whole batch of orders with an evil word.

'Not worth coming up for,' he would say. 'Dennett, tell that withered fool Cinch to come here!' And Cinch, whose name belied him, would be summoned to a feast of reason.

'Orders bad? O God! Now for a beano,' the clerks would say, piously. 'Poor old Chinnie's in for it.' Chinnie was in allusion to Cinch's physiognomy. Sometimes he was called 'Chin-chin'. He was small and bald; and he had an under-hung jaw of unusual length. He was not inept, although that was his reputation; nobody could have been inept who managed Mr. Cadman's business. He and an elderly young novelist named Agg were the only employees in Mr. Cadman's office who had agreements; the rest were subject to a week's notice, although Roger Dennett, who was engaged by the month, was to have a definite arrangement at the end of his six months' probation. It was by such means as these that Mr. Cadman kept a firm hold upon his staff. 'If you're not comfortable, you can go,' he said. What he really meant was, 'If *I'm* not comfortable, you can go,' because clerks as a body are slow to give notice. Evils unknown are more terrible to them than the tyranny of their present employer.

II

The packers, who were also the cleaners, the porters, and the general helps at Tremlett & Grove's, arrived at about half-past six in the morning. The clerks arrived at nine-fifteen, as did Mr. Cinch, who opened all letters not personally addressed to Mr. Cadman. Roger, Mr. Cadman himself, and the typists reached the office at ten o'clock: Agg, the elderly young novelist, was like the nimble pea. Sometimes he was there, sometimes he was not at all there, and sometimes he wandered in and out. When he was there he would sit at a desk with his legs crossed, looking at the ceiling, with a manuscript on his knee and his thoughts in his own world. If Mr. Cadman happened to be out, Agg would sit on Roger's desk, and talk to him about

Creative Art, drawlingly, yet with a complete assumption of knowledge. He would refer Roger to his own works as illustrating some theory. He would say: 'I did that in my—don't expect you've read it, you little swine—my—a—my . . . You know, that thing about the girl?' It was a part of his attitude that he never remembered the titles of his six novels. At some immature age, when he had been at the University, he had published a theory of art in opposition to Aristotle, to Lessing, and Tolstoi, and Victor Cousin; and he always thought with pleasure of the five hundred people who might have read this book. He often looked in the indexes of professional books on Art, in case allusion was made to him in the text; and he used to say to Roger, after such a search, 'As my learned friend "The Athenæum" would say, "the index is inadequate."'

It was, then, to an office thus staffed that Roger Dennett travelled by a Tube railway each morning. He was often a little early, and more often, at night, a little late; but his room was in a litter at all times, and he spoke to it as he spoke to children. It was not merely that it was cramped, but that it had a way of secreting his papers. A paper laid down one minute in one place was transferred rapidly by this magical room to the bottom of a pile of papers which stood elsewhere. More than anything else, this room kept alive Roger's sense of the miraculous. It was like a perpetual adventure, as though romance lurked in every corner of the room, and cunning devils from the back of the world came hither to torment him. Such romance as this transcended all the baser efforts of the typists, who kept up a thin stream of emotion in their lives by means of improvisation. He would greet them as he passed, and they would reply characteristically as they removed their hats or arranged their hair, and then he would settle down to five minutes' delicate swearing at the things which had been lost in the night.

'This strange life,' Roger would ruminate. 'Full of bewilderments. Ah, *would* you, my beauty!' Unseen hands

were stuffing a letter away between his desk and the wall, but he checkmated them by grabbing the letter. He would find that it contained a request from a novelist that the reader should not be prejudiced against her book by the first three chapters, which were necessarily dull.

'Oh, Agg!' chuckled Roger, 'I forgot that on Friday.'

Two or three manuscripts for reading or rejection were on one side of the desk: he wanted to look at one of them, because it was about his 'subject'—the sixteenth century—and Agg, who knew nothing of the sixteenth century, had turned it over to him with a laconic note: 'See if this strikes you'. A bookseller wanted to know when a book would be ready; an author demanded to hear at once why his manuscript was not dealt with; a lady wanted to bring some drawings to show. All these things Roger handled imperturbably; they were already at his finger-ends. He had once admired authors, and thought them superior beings; but it takes only a few days in a publishing house to discover what a mean creature an author is. Authors are either tremulous, and contemptible; or boastful and tiresome; or they have to be put off and kept quiet; or they have to be treated with consideration for the sake of their golden eggs. Roger soon knew this: he remembered a man's name, and was told to 'see what he wants,' and he generally found him poor stuff. The lady-artists were more amusing for a week or two, but Roger soon found that the art schools reeled them out like sausages, with floppy manners and an indefinable pressingness all to match. Some tore his heart, by their prettiness and incompetence, or their eagerness; some, by the fact that they had obviously been walking about all day from publisher to publisher. But however tired, and however incompetent, they were always indomitable; the objectionable ones smiled their 'brave' smile, and thanked him; the really charming ones, who were many, were almost willing to cast aside all pretence, and to discuss their works piecemeal. One or two explained that they had not had any-

thing to eat all day; one aged one borrowed half-a-crown. Quite fifty per cent of the lady-artists were *poseuses*, with grotesque ideas of themselves and of their sex, who walked into publishers' as though it were only a question of . . . time. . . . They were contemptuous, so tired of asking for work from men, so hopelessly incapable of seeing that it was their work and not their sex which prohibited commissions. Roger grew to hate professional women in these days. '*The-enk* you,' they would say, with offensiveness. He used to shake his head when they were gone. 'Ugh!' he would say. 'You! . . . I *hate* you!'

III

The bustle of the day began. Cadman, hurrying through, called out, 'Want you, Dennett. Come on sharp.' Roger hastened, though he knew he would be kept waiting. Cadman removed his coat and hat, 'and laid his soiled gloves by,' and looked at the orders. He gave a great chortling laugh, and stood rubbing his chin, and then stroking down his heavy moustache, which Roger was sure no genuine Viking ever did.

'Some blind fool wants copy of "*Solon and his Age*"!' he cried. 'I wonder why we did that book. . . . Now, a . . . *Dennett*! Ah! See, what was it I wanted you for? Oh yes. . . . Now, have you got Stennert's novel?'

'Went back, sir.'

'Eh? Oh yes. . . . He came up to my house last night.' Cadman was looking furtively at Roger, swollen with shame, and firm to justify an act of sentimentalism.

'At home?'

'Yes—poor devil, yes. I want my cheque book. . . . Just . . . No, I'll ring. He came crying up to my place last night. . . . *Very* bad was it?'

'Agg said so.'

'Oh yes—Agg. He *would*.'

‘He’s the only one who’s read it.’ Cadman looked at Roger meditatively. He was increasingly ashamed.

‘I expect it’s all right . . .’ he said. ‘Eh?’

‘Seemed pretty dismal rot, sir,’ Roger said. ‘You said you wouldn’t touch it.’ He too began to be sympathetically ashamed.

‘Yes, I know I did . . . but he came up to my place . . . cried all over my carpet. I think we shall have to do it, eh? I said I’d give him thirty pounds for it. We can shove it in among the others. Nobody’ll notice, eh?’

‘It’s not my idea of publishing, sir,’ Roger said.

‘No, damn you, I know it isn’t. Still, you know. . . . He’s a good *man*. You don’t think he is?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Oh, yes he is. . . . You know, that book’ll do as well . . . I got it very cheap, you know.’ The furtive swiftness of the last was tremendous. ‘He’ll bring it in this afternoon. Just look at it before you send it off. See what Agg said. . . . He may have suggested some cuts.’

‘No, sir,’ Roger said. ‘All he said was, “I have no use for this. Stennert is a verminous rogue.”’

‘Did he? Well, I wonder what made him say that? Funny sort of report, isn’t it?’

‘I think it’s Agg’s idea of dignity . . .’ Roger said.

‘I’ll see him about it before I write the cheque. . . . Eh?’

Roger found Agg, just arrived, sitting on a chair with his feet on Roger’s desk, looking, as he always did, like an Alpine-climber in practice. His strange, lean, distorted face was surmounted by a crushed cloth hat.

‘Don’t mind me,’ he said. ‘Do you?’

‘Ah, my lad, we’re going to do Stennert!’ Agg was up like a piece of elastic.

‘What! O—o—oh!’ He sat down again. ‘I’m tired!’ he said. ‘Why, d’you know, Dennett. . . . It’s foul . . . it’s *foul*.’ Nobody could have pronounced the word so effectively. It was ‘fahool,’ and took an appreciable time to form in his mouth.

'He's going to see you about it. . . . About your report.'

'What did I say? Roger repeated it. 'Well, *that's* dignified enough, ain't it? I mean, we ain't philanthropists. Come in here with his nasty, rubbishin', scurvy novels. It's obscene. It's . . . foul!' By all these epithets, Agg did not mean that he considered the book immoral or indecent; he simply meant that the book was bad. His judgment, as Roger knew, was keen; but his colloquial manner was less precise than it might have been. In his books Agg's love of precision led him into great detail, and this, combined with a certain empty accomplishment, was all that Roger ever found in Agg's work. It was very fantastic, because Agg was one of those who never grow out of the undergraduate stage; but it was very long, and very rotund. Many people liked Agg's work, because it never made them uncomfortable and bewildered; he earned about two hundred pounds a year by his writing, and he was quite poor enough to find it welcome.

'It's not at all dignified, as you know,' Roger said. 'It's not true, either.'

'But my good man, who said it was?' Agg drew himself up, with his little cloth hat on the side, and his strange goggle eyes curling. A large, misshapen mouth opened slowly. 'If one wrote true reports d'you think old Walrus would understand 'em? They've got to *smell*, before he knows what they mean! One says a man's a bad artist, he don't know what a bad artist is. One says a man's muddy, or moultin', or somethin', and he spots it. He says . . . No, don't you see . . . he says "Mustn't touch this man". . . . He thinks about pitch . . . defilin' him. . . . Now this man Stennert's got no sense of form. Starts with a mouldy description of the Pampas or the Steppes, or somethin' . . . like G. P. R. James or Mayne Reid. Have to wade through that. . . . Then, what's worse, drops a couple of years accidentally by the way. And, Oh my—eh? Was that somebody came in?'

'Typist,' Roger said, waiting. 'She heard you begin to swear, and went out.'

'She *shouldn't* have done that. . . . Well. . . . *This girl*, she. . . . Oh yes, it all comes back. . . . She goes away—leaves the man. . . . Understand? Goes back home. . . . That last scene's more'n I or any man can bear. He comes after her. There's a devil of a row. All about "human passion"—he means "Sex". Ought to have been a woman . . . *they* go in for that sort of thing. Women can't write a novel without a love-child. The way he squalls over this girl. It's . . . No *art*, you know. Yes, two years clean dropped out. All twisted about. . . . No continuity. First you're in the Alps, then you're in Paris, then it's Dresden . . . London slums. I reckon that's the fattest thing Cadman's touched yet.'

'Will it sell?' Roger asked. 'That's the main thing, to him. . . .'

'It will *not*,' Agg said, emphatically. 'And d'you know why? Because the woman's a bundle of rags, flung about all over the shop, to one man after another. You can have a good bundle of *virtuous* rags, if you like; but this . . . Sawdust's *drippin'* out of her. . . . Mark my words, Dennett. I'm dead *on* it! If he's going to do that book, I don't see much good in my readin' the things. *Do you?*'

'Well, when Meredith was a reader,' Roger suggested, 'they over-rode him.'

'Ah . . . Meredith wasn't an artist. Find him all in Charlotte Yonge, without the frippery.'

'Oh heart!' said Roger. 'Well, go and stop Mr. Cadman writing the cheque!'

Agg rolled himself off the chair, and went in search of his cross.

IV

In the counting-house, while Cinch was otherwise employed, Jerdow was singing a comic song. Bright went

over to Edward Amerson. He had had a week-end to think of Mary.

'I didn't see you to say good night on Saturday,' he said, seriously.

'Sorry, old man,' Teddy apologized. 'I suppose I was busy.' Bright was under the impression that Teddy had avoided him. He always thought people avoided him, and used to say, contemptuously. 'Hn . . . not *good* enough, aren't I? We'll see. . . .' Teddy went on, 'Hope you had a good time?'

'Yes, thanks. . . . I say, is Dennett often at your place?'

'He's an old friend of ours. . . .'

'Yes. . . . I mean, does he often drop in?'

Teddy, for his own reasons, wanted to evade this questioning.

'He was at school with us. . . . We've known him for years.'

Bright thought something was being concealed from him. He had quite expected it.

'So that really you know him very well?'

'Yes. . . . Why *not*?'

'Oh, no reason. It just struck me he was . . . very much at home. . . .'

'Yes.'

'I s'pose he's all right?'

Teddy stared at Bright's face, which was as expressionless as usual. His mind gave two small jumps. One brought him to the point of wondering if there was anything in it; the other raised the question of Bright's object.

'How d'you mean?' he asked.

Bright shrugged his shoulders. He was intensely self-conscious and serious, and an egoist. Things and speeches gnawed into his brain, so that he thought of them continually, and dwelt upon them. The habit of his mind was such that he was afraid of being deceived, or snubbed. The fear of a snub made him sneer.

‘How you take a thing up!’ he said. ‘I only asked the question. Can’t I ask a question?’

Teddy walked away, thinking him a fool. Bright stood pensively for a moment, biting his lip. It wasn’t good to have a break with anyone, least of all with Teddy. . . . He followed Teddy.

‘Hullo, here’s old Jonah!’ Jerdow cried. ‘Hasn’t half got a pip on him ’smornin’.’ Bright ignored Jerdow.

‘I only meant,’ he said quietly to Teddy, ‘that I think it’s good to be friendly with Dennett. Nobody knows what he says when he’s in with Mr. Cadman. . . . He has the opportunity for saying . . . anything . . .’

‘True, O King!’ Teddy said. ‘Now, go away, old man. I’m having a rehearsal of a new piece. . . . I’m going to do it at Jerdow’s show. You’d better come. . . . It’s Thursday. I’m going to take the girls. . . . Old Moggerson’s coming.’

‘Your sisters?’ asked Bright.

‘Mabel and Mary.’

‘You don’t think I’d be in the way?’ he asked, scrupulously. ‘Would they care for me to come?’ Teddy and Jerdow exchanged glances. Jerdow nodded his head, and clucked slightly in disparagement of Bright.

V

Roger settled to his work. He had several proof-sheets to glance at, and letters to write, and he had various people to see. For a time he was lost to everything, because he was checking some dates. Then, at about half-past eleven, Gassel, the completely junior clerk, announced Mr. Amerson. Mr. Amerson had come, not on any private matter, but simply because on Mondays he visited all the publishers with whom his firm did business. He came into Roger’s little room, and sat in the only spare chair, producing from his pocket a large sheet upon which appeared a statement as to the exact position of all the work in hand. The list was not large, because one publishing season was in full

swing, and the next was too far off for many books to be printing. Roger looked over the list, and nodded.

'You don't want to see Mr. Cadman? There's no need. He telephoned about the reprint of "Tanner's Trust". . . . You're not looking very grand, Mr. Amerson. . . .'

Mr. Amerson was sixty, and he had the same greyness that his sons showed. But this morning he looked tired, and his eyes were lifeless.

'I'm not feeling very grand, Roger,' he said. 'I can't say the same for you. . . . You always look the picture of health.' Roger laughed. 'When you get to my age you'll feel a little older. . . . See, how old *are* you?'

'Twenty-four.'

'Ah, well, life's before you. See that you use it carefully.'

'I'm afraid there's not much chance of my being able to do anything else,' Roger said. Mr. Amerson did not see any meaning in such a phrase, though it was full of meaning.

'How d'you think Ted is doing?' he asked, abruptly, looking at Roger with his dull eyes.

'Well, Mr. Amerson . . . I suppose he has his own plans.'

'Plans . . . What d'you mean? He mustn't have plans.'

'I really didn't mean anything vicious . . . I thought the counting-house a fly-paper, that was all . . .'

'You mean there's not much chance of getting on? He's very young.'

'It's not like specialized work . . . ' Roger suggested, hesitatingly.

'It's all he's fit for . . . '

'Won't it make him a poor man?'

'Well, I'm a poor man. You know, Roger, I depend absolutely on what I earn. Ted's money makes him independent . . . '

'But what if he should want to marry?' Roger urged. 'I thought his reciting might . . . '

'God forbid! I hope that'll never happen.'

'But you said . . . about his ability. . . .'

'I've got Tom in my office, and he's got the best head

in the family. Ted’s just standing still. He’ll never do any more than that.’

‘I thought he *couldn’t* do anything else here.’

‘Well, when I go . . .’

‘Mr. Amerson!’

‘He’ll have to stick to his work here. His reciting’s no good to him. It’s a waste of time. At his age—to be mixed up in that acting crowd. He’s not skilled in anything else. . . . His reports were bad all the time at school . . . I haven’t forgotten that. It was one of the bitterest disappointments in my life to see them every week.’

Slowly, Mr. Amerson rose, and shook hands. He left Roger thinking to himself. He wondered what his own father felt about him. He saw something more clearly than he had ever done before—that the Amerson children were almost what he would call perfunctory accidents. He saw that there was no life in the Amerson family, as there was in his own; and he wondered if there was not a great deal of very virtuous wickedness in the world. As for Teddy, he could not understand Mr. Amerson’s attitude; it was largely, he saw, that Mr. Amerson could sympathize only with a certain restricted range of character; and yet there was a sort of dead acuteness in Mr. Amerson’s vision. Teddy had all that instinct for living that every sane man has, and yet his idea of living was simply the exhaustion of time. His reciting was a pastime, he had no power to rest, and no power to imagine. He had no apparent place in Roger Dennett’s universe of interdependent souls.

‘What a very tinpot little maundering fathead you are!’ Roger said to himself. ‘Now to confront the Tender Janet with her letterful of mistakes!’ By which he advertised his visit to Miss Janet Tender, in the next room, with a letter in which she had made every conceivable mistyping.

VI

Robson Joyce had come into the counting-house, bustling with all his commercial traveller’s fury. He had been

getting orders from the West End trade, and he was exhorting Tremlett & Grove's clerks to 'put a little life into it'. Be-ringed and gorgeous, with a fierce red moustache and a face like a savage farmer, he was an incarnation of spurious energy. Life to Joyce was the art of making things hum, and other people fly. He had a great reputation although he was only thirty-five, and was proud of it. When he went into the country, jovial booksellers said to him, 'Hello, Joyce: Cadman still with you?' and he told the joke with guffaws of laughter, unconscious of the fact that they said the same things, as effectively, to other pushful travellers. He was a healthy animal, always appearing to do everything with zest, and yet never exerting a muscle; and his moustache would bristle all the time as a most valuable assistance to his jokes. It seemed almost to lead the laughter, as an effective wink would have done, drawing a bristling attention to Joyce's full, hearty lips.

'Damme,' he would say, 'I'd make some of you fellows work!' He was very fond of going to talk to Miss Tender and Miss Virks, and he used to lean against the wall with his hat on the back of his head, and tell them stories. 'You girls!' he would say. 'Why don't you put some *back-bone* into it?' Sometimes he would stop short in his stories and say, 'No, that's the wrong one,' and wink to show how exceeding arch that story was; at other times he barely saved Miss Tender and Miss Virks from being genuinely embarrassed by some touch of impropriety. To him, as well as to them, it was always a most difficult and delicate adventure to survive a talk in which they all took part, yet he would never venture a talk with Miss Tender or Miss Virks alone. He had that particular kind of nature which cannot tell a story to one hearer: he would be daring, even risky, with the two, but one of them singly took all the pungency from his conversation. Miss Tender and Miss Virks, being both of them sentimental girls who pretended to be more refined than they were, found a peculiarly fearful joy in Joyce's tales. They still laughed consciously at

stockings, but anything coarser made them so uncomfortable that their colour heightened; it was to produce that heightened colour once in each talk that Joyce worked; and he did it with a mischief that robbed him of real unsavouriness.

Joyce, this morning, was standing in the counting-house, when Gassel came over to Bright and said, ‘Mrs. Bright wants to speak to you a minute. . . .’ She had come to borrow some money, finding that she had left her purse at home, and that her proposed shopping excursion was threatened with collapse. As Bright came round to the front office, Joyce followed him with his eye. A most stylish woman, of something over thirty, stood there. Her costume was in the height of fashion; her manner was as confident as that of any unrefined woman perfectly aware of her charm could be. Upon her head was a strange bee-hive hat. Her lips were carmine; her eyes liquidly bright; in Joyce’s eyes her figure justified the hobble-skirt. Yet she was obviously not a woman to accept light treatment from either sex.

‘Hullo, hullo, hullo,’ Joyce cried. ‘Didn’t know you were married, B.! Lucky chap!’

‘It’s my step-mother,’ Bright said, rather sulkily. He always felt like a Sultan or an English clerk about his women-folk, and resented deeply the admiration of other men. He thought them immodest to court such attention.

‘Damme,’ said Joyce. ‘Introduce me. I’m going Mrs. Bright’s way.’

CHAPTER V

THE CONCERT

I

ON Thursday evening, Roger Dennett stayed late at the office in order that the proofs of a book might be finally read for press before, as the clerical author said, the book was 'struck-off' (a phrase much used by authors under the impression that it is technical). When he left the office he knew that the appointment he had made was definitely broken. So he wandered in search of food. He went down Southampton Street, and into the brilliantly-lighted Strand, along which crowded motor-omnibuses were thundering, and taxi-cabs whizzing. As he turned West, Roger came face to face with Viola Bright, who instantly held out her hand with a delightful recognition.

'What *ever* are you doing here?' she inquired, gaily.

'I'm looking for something to eat. What are *you* doing?'

'I'm looking for something to eat, too,' she said. 'I'm going to a concert.'

'Then we'd better look together,' cried Roger, gallantly. She was a picture, in a large black hat with a white bird in it, and a black dress which displayed her pretty figure. Men going along the Strand looked back at her, amazed. Roger felt that it was distinctly an adventure.

'Where are you going afterwards?' Viola asked, when they were seated together in Gatti's.

'Home . . . ' he said.

'Oh . . . I . . . 'spose you wouldn't care to come with me to the concert?'

'Now where is this concert? I've heard a lot about it, but it's as vague as most things,' Roger said. She showed him her ticket, and as it was in her handbag, along with her handkerchief, it carried with it the perfume that Viola always used. Even at this time Roger remembered the perfume, and smiled. The concert was at a hall in Fulham. 'It's very nice of you,' he said, 'I *should* like to come.' He thought that he would, after all, see Mary there. If he went as Viola's escort, he felt that Mary's refusal of his presence would not hold good. So he ate his dinner and looked at Viola, who bore the scrutiny without flinching. She knew she could bear it: she invited it; and Roger only looked at her because she was talking or because he was talking to her. Other men looked at her without such clear reason, and she was aware of it all.

'People *stare* so,' she remarked to Roger, confidentially.

'You mustn't blame them,' he said. Such an attitude, as he knew, was far from Viola's nature. She sat there, breaking her bread with delicate little white fingers, and her rich dark hair showing beneath the big hat. In her every movement there was a complete grace, only slightly impaired by the fact that it was conscious and under control. Roger could not fail to take pleasure in the knowledge of her grace. If he compared her with every girl he knew it must be to her advantage in this quality, because she knew exactly what she could wear effectively, and how it should be worn. There was no superfluous trimming upon her dress, just as there was no lack of confidence in her bearing: she was quite as sure of herself as of her costume. He might smile at Viola's strange sophisticated ingenuousness; but she interested him in spite of it. He had sounded no depth in her nature; but he knew she had explored it thoroughly. If she made mistakes, it was due to her lack of experience in particular temperaments, not to her lack of consideration. Once she fell to an understanding of his nature, she would make few mistakes;

her judgment would be cunning and sure. She had a keen commercial sense, a keen sense of the things in character which she most valued; and she had no desire to be unsophisticated. She was essentially a modern girl, who had to fend for herself, and to master the details of those she met as she mastered the details of her business. If she remained single, she would grow a little harder, a little cynical, but she would never lose her head and would discharge the responsibility she accepted; if she married, her husband would find himself growing less poor in worldly things, more sure of the stability of his home; and he would become almost ignorant of the fact that his life lacked ecstasy. She was shrewd, observant, acute; but she was still young in mind, and not rich in experience of men and things which lay outside her daily life in office and at home.

‘Is your brother going to-night?’ Roger asked.

‘Yes. . . . Didn’t he tell you? Oh, I forgot . . . I suppose you don’t talk to each other.’

‘Not from any . . . particular cause. I don’t see much of him. He’s a very quiet chap, isn’t he?’

‘Oh, awfully quiet. He’s clever.’ She drew her mouth in, to seem judicial.

‘Yes.’

‘He thinks—a—that he’s not liked at the office. . . .’ She was looking at Roger from the deep shadow. Roger shrugged his shoulders. He did not know anything about that.

‘I’ve never heard of it. Very likely he . . . doesn’t cotton on to the others. D’you think that’s it?’

‘I meant, by the principals.’

‘Oh, Miss Bright. . . . They’ve got a great deal to do. I believe he’s considered efficient,’ Roger said. ‘They never talk about the people in the office. Surely you know that principals are inclined to forget individuals?’

‘Not at our place. It’s very keen there. Anybody does anything wrong. . . . It all comes up in a minute.’

‘What,—a row?’

‘The girls. . . . They make a mistake, or anything. Manager says, “Oh, Miss Dickson again.” Like that. . . .’

‘Poor Miss Dickson!’

‘Well, she’s got to go. Course she’s brought it on herself. Coming late. . . . There’s a man—takes her out to dinner. *She* thinks she’s independent. But I heard them saying she’d got to go. . . . They asked me if I thought she was . . . Well, I couldn’t say she was a good worker.’

‘Will you get her job?’ Roger entered into the spirit of the thing.

‘Oh no. . . . It’ll make very little difference to me. A girl I know gets her job.’

‘And what happens to Miss Dickson?’

‘Well, she . . . It’s all a question of competition. *Some* have got to drop out.’

Roger laughed.

‘It must be rather exciting . . . at your office.’

‘Twenty-four girls. They take a bit of managing. They’d show your fellows a little, I expect. I mean,’—she corrected herself—‘they’d teach them how to work. Girls may not be able to beat men or get as much wages, but they *can* work. The men seem half-asleep, nowadays. Things are always happening, at our place.’

‘So I should think,’ Roger ventured. ‘It must be a continual battle.’

‘Doesn’t do to be ill long,’ Viola said. ‘You get a note—typed by the one who’s taken your job.’

Roger noticed the vivacity in her face. She was answering to what she supposed was his own ‘push’. She thought that to get such a position as his, without influence, argued superior smartness. She admired that; she admired position; even more than she admired birth.

‘Do have some of this trifle,’ he urged.

‘It’ll make me tipsy. . . . Well, a little. . . .’ There was something in her archness which was very delightful to

Roger, as an unattached young man. 'Course . . . what I was saying makes it all the—er—better for the girls who stay. They get . . . pretty well paid.' She was not proof against the wish to show that she, too, was making a position. 'Still, there's something better than typing. . . . I mean, I shouldn't like to spend *all* my life there. I'd rather go into business.'

'I think it's very plucky of you,' Roger remarked.

'There was nothing else to do. Our step-mother's got a little money; but Sep and I haven't anything to live on . . . except what we earn.' Roger had a faint sense that the phrase was familiar, but he could not remember who had last used it to him.

'We're all in the same boat,' he vouchsafed. Viola nodded once, sharply.

'Makes you feel independent,' she said.

'Are you ambitious, then?'

'No, I only want to live comfortably. If you've watched every penny!'

'My penny watches me,' Roger said. 'Has an awful time.' Viola laughed incredulously.

'Yes . . . I expect you *have* only got one penny!' she cried.

'I'll put it under the plate,' Roger said. 'It's too great a responsibility.'

Viola saw exactly what he gave as a tip, and remembered it. She walked out of Gatti's at his side with an aristocratic languor. She half longed for a taxi-cab, and half commended Roger's restraint in not having one. She did not like young men to be wasteful, yet she thought a little was due to her costume. She would not, however, have taken a taxi, or dined at Gatti's, if she had been alone. She would frankly have realized that she could not afford it, as Roger did. They went from Leicester Square tube-station and walked the short distance at the other end of the journey; and when they arrived at the hall it was half-full.

II

With what simple effectiveness did Viola move to her place! The other occupants of the hall looked with chagrin at her appearance. Some of them said, 'There's Viola Bright,' but most of them just gasped 'Oo, look!' or looked in strained silence. Roger got the reflected attention of the sightseers, like the footman behind a royal carriage. Mary, who was sitting beside Septimus Bright, received a shock, and felt her heart beat a little. It was ever so slight a disappointment to her to see him with Viola; but she could not help feeling rather glad Roger had come. She had been sitting beside Septimus, and trying to talk, while Mabel sat almost tearfully at her other side, with a vacant chair next her. Mabel's shoulders were twitching with her strangled desire to look round at the entrance doors; but she dared not obey her instinct. It was a melancholy group, for Septimus was too full of anxiety to please, and disdain for ordinary means of arousing pleasure, and his own slowly-passionate feelings; and a high new collar was making his neck sore.

Viola had managed to receive a clear impression of the hall as she entered; but Roger spent some few minutes in looking for Mary before he found her, and nodded. Viola watched him nod, and wondered.

'I shouldn't go over,' she said, intimately. Roger frowned, considering the matter.

'Not?' he asked. 'Why not?'

'Not if you're a Christian,' she whispered, bending over to him so that her shoulder touched his. 'Give him a chance.'

'Chance?' whispered back Roger, in bewilderment. 'Give *who, what?*'

'My brother . . . Mary. . . . See?' she smiled back at him. Roger's mouth opened.

'O-oh!' he exclaimed, and said no more.

'You don't *mind?*' Viola asked daringly. 'He's an

awfully good boy. I know she's rather a favourite of yours.' Roger's face told her nothing. He produced chocolates that he had bought *en route*.

'Have some of these,' he advised. 'You'll want stimulant if I know anything of concerts.' Viola did not press her inquiry as to his interest in the couple across the way. She was content to keep him by her side.

'If it's anything like a party,' she said. 'Did you *ever* see anything *like* some of the people who were there? Come out after the rain, I should think.'

'Some of them *were* strange,' he admitted. 'Here's a man with a programme.'

The programme had been inexpensively produced, and Viola declined to touch it.

'You hold it,' she said. 'I don't like the look of it.'

'It *is* rather mangy.' Roger was bound to acknowledge the truth of her attitude both over the party and the programme. He became conscious that her manner had changed, and he supposed that she had taken his measure, for she was stepping out into original observations upon phenomena. She was also beginning to take possession of him, which he had not yet observed. As they sat upon the two wooden chairs which were their lot in this hall, they were bound to touch each other, a fact of which Viola was acutely conscious, although Roger, who never noticed things of that sort, was ignorant. He was, for all his humorous observation, a little ignorant of young women; they seemed to him like little girls grown up, which, however true it may be on the surface, is but a tenth part of the whole truth.

'See that girl—one, two, three, along the front row. Isn't her hair ridiculously done! I wouldn't go out with it done like that . . .'

'I shouldn't expect it of you,' Roger said decidedly.

Viola was delighted, and put her head down to hide her silent laughter.

Behind them was some audible conversation.

'Shahn' be able to see a *thing!*' somebody declared. A girl followed.

'It's too bad to come out in a thing like *that!*'

'Isn't she *going* to?'

'Why don't you *ask* her!' came a whisper. Then a scraping sound, and a muttered oath as somebody dropped a walking-stick. Roger felt a deliberate tapping on his shoulder.

'Ask your good lady . . . take off her hat!' came a hot breath in his ear.

With a very pleasant smile Viola heard the last drop of discussion, and then, very slowly, with painful deliberateness, took out the heavy hatpin, and lifted her enormous hat off. Nobody said 'Thank-you'; they were too intent upon watching Viola's proceedings. She patted down her hair with extraordinary dilatoriness, and put her hat so that it rested against the seat in front as well as upon her knees. Then she turned, and with one of the rare flashes that started awake Roger's admiration for her, she smiled mischievously.

III

The concert itself was negligible. Teddy scrambled through his recitation; Jerdow sang his song. A girl opened the proceedings by a very stumbling performance of Mendelssohn's 'Bee's Wedding,' to which nobody listened. A male singer sang sadly; a girl singer sang a man's song. At the interval, Viola turned to Roger with an inscrutable expression.

'I've had enough,' she said.

'Let's go and speak to the others a minute, and we'll go.'

They edged out of the row and went to where Mary and Mabel were sitting. Roger saw his hurried acquaintance of Saturday evening sitting beside Mabel. Mary was obviously tired out; there was a pathetic droop to her mouth, and her eyes seemed to Roger almost reproachful. Viola did not

leave his side for a moment, and he could not be more than casually conversational. Viola stood so that the girls in the audience could admire her. For just a moment, Septimus left his seat, in order to speak to Viola, and Roger dropped into it.

‘Tired?’ he asked. Mary shook her head. ‘I met Miss Bright in the Strand, and we came along together. You’ll forgive me for coming, won’t you?’

‘Are you going now?’ she asked. Her eyes rested anxiously on Viola for a second. Roger saw a shadow pass across her face and he wondered whether Mary, for all her ingenuousness, was not more inscrutable than Viola. Slowly her eyes came round to his, and she smiled faintly. ‘It’s not a very good concert,’ she murmured. They saw that the Brights were waiting, and Roger said good-bye.

‘So long, Sep,’ Viola said. In the vestibule she said, ‘Hold my bag,’ and swiftly put her hat on again, sweeping a glance into her little pocket mirror to see that it was straight. In the tube train she went along to the end of the carriage, where there were little compartments, and sat with her back to the door. Roger sat opposite to her. ‘Come this side,’ she cried, ‘I want to put my feet under the other seat!’

They seemed quite alone in the carriage after the first station or two, because they were too early for returning theatre parties; Viola’s hat was so large that whenever she moved her head, Roger had to jerk his head aside. She looked out at him after one of these incidents, and signed to him to approach under the hat.

‘Mind your *eyes*!’ she shouted above the din.

‘Why d’you wear such a big one?’ he shouted back. She shook her head. At every piece of conversation, Roger became strongly aware of the perfume she used; it seemed to hang about his nostrils like the scent of lilies, overpowering him. He began to see her less humorously. He could see her delicate white hands lying still in her lap, ringless and firm, with her gloves lying on her handbag.

He began to notice how she thought—how rapid was the feeling that checked her in the middle of a sentence; and he thought there was perhaps an exquisite mechanism in her mind, fine in spite of her faint lack of purity, a fineness that disturbed his humour and then dislodged it. He found her increasingly interesting; she made no appeal to his emotion, but she drew his senses and his brain. Quite clearly, Roger saw this: he had, as yet, no illusion; but he was irresistibly attracted to her. And Viola had no use for emotion in her life; it lay outside her understanding. She had a mind that never wavered, but she was ignorant of emotion. Her life had been too hard, and her experience too restricted, for the proper development of her emotion. But she had a strong instinct and she was not afraid of her own perceptions. She did not fall into a sentimental blur, as many girls do, at the thought of marriage; but she looked as shrewdly upon men as she looked upon money. That was, in its way, her charm.

They left the train at Belsize Park, and travelled in the lift. As she passed a mirror which advertised a mineral water, Viola caught a glimpse of herself. She did not look frankly at the mirror, as she would have done if she had been alone; but she saw herself clearly, and then stood by Roger's side as the lift gates opened and released them to the crisp air of Hampstead. They turned down through the churchyard into Pond Street.

‘It's awfully good of you . . .’ she said. ‘Won't you come up and see my step-mother?’

IV

Mrs. Bright, however, was out, and Roger, beyond seeing the Brights' sitting-room, with its plain furniture, gained no further insight into the ways of the house. He left, after a few minutes' talk, and Viola went with him to the front-door, which she did not open.

‘I wish you would—a—come and meet her,’ she said.

'She'd be *awfully* interested to know you. . . . Won't you come?' Roger indicated that he would be pleased to come, and they stood in the passage, Viola holding the latch, Roger holding his hat. 'Come to tea on Saturday,' she urged. 'Sunday, then. . . . Five o'clock? Come earlier if you like. . . . Half-past four. I shall be here. Well, good-night . . . and thanks so much. . . .'

Roger carried away a memory of her eyes as shining rounds, and went down the street smiling. Viola went back into the room and raised her arms in a little yawn. Her heart was beating faster than usual.

Roger went up by the side of the Heath, which lay on his right all black and mysterious. He climbed slowly up with his head among the pale stars, and once stopped to look across the heath and hear the trees whispering gently above his head. The sky was very light, a pearl grey, and there was no moon. The stars lay in the depths, so pale and tender that they seemed a part of his understanding of life, giving him a strange sense of intimacy with this silent world; and the vision brought him back to the eternal. The little strivings and squabblings of publishers and authors fell away; his non-committal interest in ordinary human affairs, and especially in Viola Bright, became matters of detail, and his emotion answered as it had never done before to the appeal of distance and far spaces. But when Roger resumed his journey he was altered. He was not as he had been in the morning. He was no wiser, he was no clearer in his understanding; he had only touched something he could not hold. Yet such an aspiration filled his soul that he was hardly conscious of the stages of his journey.

V

Another party, also returning home from the concert, was quieter. Septimus Bright sat with Mary, and Mogger-son with Mabel. None of them had anything to say. Mabel was making an attempt to appear flippant and at

ease, but there was such an undercurrent of uneasiness in her ease and of flatness in her flippancy that she added nothing but a further touch of dullness to the party, and presently became as silent as the others.

Bright was thinking over and over again: 'She wouldn't have me . . . she wouldn't have me,' and Moggerson, trying to comfort himself with doses of confidence, was thinking that he had only to put out his little finger. Mabel was in a flurry; and Mary wanted only to be at home, and alone. She felt that there was nothing in her life; that it had become something simply composed of routine, of getting breakfast in the morning, of washing dishes, of getting dinner and tea and supper, of avoiding Grace and evading her mother. The boys, of course, were a comfort, however brusque they might be, because nobody had ever thought of regarding them as more than unusually welcome visitors, with privileges beyond the normal, and manners beyond reproach. Otherwise, but for Ted and Tom, there was nobody to care much about, nobody who cared anything about her. She felt very lonely, in the midst of her family, for she saw all of them engaged mysteriously in some pursuit, while she herself had no interest beyond those things that Roger evidently thought she should despise. Why should he have come and interfered? He had first of all hinted that she differed from the others; he had made her feel 'out of it,' and he had brought down upon her that scene of the other evening. It had made her miserable. He—of course, *he* could go about differently; he could take Viola Bright to the concert; he could go to a home where everybody seemed happy and contented. There was nobody to criticize him, and he had got plenty of things that interested him all the time. He had made her restless; she could not do her work with the same pleasure, because he had shown her that the things she was doing were not worth while. It was all very well for him; he didn't see that she couldn't do anything else. She was just a stupid ordinary girl who knew nothing, who

could only do these things that she was engaged in doing. He despised them—he despised all the Amersons. And she might feel indignant, full of protest, but she could no longer uphold them. There was not a thing she could point to in their favour; they were none of them very fond—oh what disloyalty! Unconvincingly, she told herself that they were *very* fond of each other. She could not get away from that; she kept on saying they were fond of each other and not believing it. She tried to force herself to believe it. *Of course* they were fond of each other; they were brothers and sisters, and *must* love one another. They might not show it, because English people were not sentimental and silly as foreigners were; but *deep down*. . . . Perhaps she wished they showed it a little more; you wanted to know that you were loved. It was absurd to think that you *didn't* know. You just *knew*. You knew, you knew, you knew! No, you didn't. Well, she would think it funny if Tom came up to her and said, 'Mary, I love you'. She would feel awfully embarrassed if he said any such thing; it would make her angry. She couldn't understand it. Something was wrong. No, nothing was wrong. She was morbid; and Roger didn't *understand*. He was too ready; he didn't know the inner part of the family. He hardly knew Tom at all, and didn't know how wise and clever he was. Besides, he was conceited. Fancy, if she were to go and criticize the Dennetts! Oh, no, it was different. They *were* happy! She was too sure of that. But then Roger *must* be wrong. She wished he had not such an appearance of being right. She wished she could be at home. She wished . . . Suddenly, she wished definitely that he had not come with Viola Bright. Viola was flashy. . . . Her mind fled in a panic from the thought of Viola and Roger.

They were nearly home, now, and the others had gone ahead. She was walking beside Septimus Bright, and hoping they would move faster, so that she could be alone. She wanted to be *alone*, right away from anybody. If only

she could be alone, she would be happy. What was that Mr. Bright was saying?

'Very glad she had come to-night . . . to have the opportunity of being in her company for the evening. . . .' What a strange thing to say!

'It's been very nice,' she said, politely, because she could hardly say anything else. He went on talking so low that she could hardly hear . . . about hoping he had not bored her . . . about his temperament. . . . *What* was it? How peculiar! 'Oh no, really . . .' she ventured. She had to look where she was going, for they were at a turning. A motor-car came round the corner, and Septimus pulled her back. For a second she was crushed against him, and then she heard his voice coming in little jets.

'Looked forward . . . wanted to say . . . felt he was not making himself clear . . . valued very much her good opinion . . . must take this opportunity of saying. . . . He had never felt the same . . . anybody. . . . Hadn't anything to offer . . . work hard . . . life, loneliness. . . .' He was asking her to marry him!

'Oh, *please* make haste!' cried Mary desperately. 'I can't . . . Mabel's. . . . My sister's . . . I can't understand you. . . . I *have* enjoyed it. . . . No no, I don't think . . .' It *wasn't* real? What was it made her feel so flustered?

'I've never felt the same about anybody else,' he was urging. 'I've always thought I never should want to marry. But you're so different. . . . Won't you *think* of it? I don't express myself very readily; but I . . . In fact, I love you.' Septimus had struggled with himself; the word 'love' had presented many difficulties to him, especially at the moment, but he had pronounced it. Wouldn't she . . . he had been too abrupt. . . .

'Oh, I *wish* you'd stop!' cried Mary. 'I couldn't hear what you said. I've never thought about it.' She was torn between bewilderment, indignation, and a readiness to cry.

Septimus walked very erectly at her side, his heart

beating fast, and his mouth trembling. He saw only too surely that the others had stopped outside the gate. Something kept his tongue lifeless; he could not speak. . . .

The others had been talking in low tones, and Moggerson was leaning back on his cane, with his hat on the back of his head. There was a strange parting, with Mary and Septimus very nervous, and Mabel and Moggerson very 'bright,' as musicians say; but none of them was very happy. Moggerson bade farewell, and went a step or two away, while Septimus was more formal. He held Mary's hand and tried to see her eyes.

'*Don't* cast me aside!' he said, 'Mary. . . .' He was speaking in a whisper. Mary withdrew her hand, and opened the gate, and Mabel followed her. Septimus stood waiting for some sign, but when Mary passed into the house without turning her head, he slowly followed Moggerson. A deep flush had risen to his cheeks, which before had been white. They walked on in silence, Moggerson thinking to himself, 'This feller's a pi.'

CHAPTER VI

VIOLA IN LOVE

I

WHEN Roger reached the Brights' house on Sunday, the door was opened by Viola, who wore a surprisingly daring gown in thin black and white stripes. He followed her into the sitting-room, which looked much as it had done on the occasion of his previous entry, since it lacked an occupant. Viola said her step-mother would be with her presently, and made Roger take a comfortable chair. Her cheeks were a little flushed, but she held a small fan to protect her face from the fire-glow, and stretched her foot out so that it rested upon the fender. They agreed that it was cold.

'Sep's gone over to Kentish Town,' she said. 'You know what *that* means.'

'What *does* it mean?' asked Roger, sitting luxuriously in the chair. He caught sight of a photograph of Viola at an early age, and looked fixedly at it.

'It means . . . a . . . well, it means he's gone to see the Amersons,' Viola said. She could not tell why she felt so ill at ease; but it was true that she was confused at having to elucidate her own profound thoughts. She brought her foot sharply away from the fender, as though it had been scorched. 'I thought you'd be interested.' Roger baffled her whenever she mentioned Mary: he did not seem to resent what she said, yet he did not agree with her. She wanted to torment him about Mary; she would like to have harped on the idea that Mary was 'rather a favourite' of his, as she had suggested before, a fact which she was

still capable of making very satirically amusing to herself. Yet he neither accepted her allusions nor showed any confirmative sign of dissent. That, in itself, would have mortified her; but she was growing restless, because she could not help feeling jealous of Mary. Tepid little thing—Viola thought—what could anybody see in her? Here was Septimus coming out of his desire for money because he had fallen in love with a pretty face; and here again was Roger, giving no sign. 'I know you're as interested as I am. . . .' She looked at Roger from beneath her lowered eyelids.

'But then I'm interested in so many things,' Roger said, without moving a muscle. Viola so far forgot herself as to tap her foot upon the floor. Roger saw the motion, and heard the faintest rustling. The fire spurted up, and threw a warm light upon her hair, and he could observe that she was looking at him intently. 'And so are you, I'm sure,' he added, looking back. Viola smiled.

'It's awfully nice to have a rest,' she observed. 'I look forward to Sunday. . . . The evenings are very early, aren't they? . . .' She was afraid, so she was throwing common-places at him. Roger could see, as the dusk fell, Viola's gleaming dress inflamed by the light of the fire. He could see the room as a strange dark emptiness, with all the clear objects near him gradually fading into darkness, until only the fire, and the hearthrug, and Viola were visible. He could hear a breeze out in the street, sweeping dust and small stones along in its flight; and once a little smoke appeared to hover about the fire before rising beyond view. So they sat together, and they hardly spoke. Viola felt that she had nothing to say; Roger felt that nothing required to be said when silence was so much more comfortable and communicative. The thoughts of both were busy, and presently Viola's thoughts grew too pressing to be borne silently in such a quietness. She sat forward in her chair.

'Better have a light,' she said. They both rose, and Roger offered to light the gas. She took the matchbox

from him and tried to turn the screw governing the burner ; but Roger's stronger fingers appeared to be needed, and so they completed the work together. Then they both laughed. 'Fools we must have looked, with our arms in the air !' Viola said. Yet immediately afterwards she raised her arms again, to lower the gas slightly. Roger, standing near, could see how pretty she looked with her arms raised.

II

Mrs. Bright—whom Viola called Agatha—came into the room a moment after the lighting of the gas, and Roger, who had never seen her before, was struck dumb with amazement at so remarkable a woman. He recognized at once that the late Mr. Bright must have been a connoisseur, for Mrs. Bright was like a flash of scarlet in a landscape. She was *vivid* : there was no other word apt enough to describe her. She was rich in every way, in colouring and in style ; but not aggressively so. He could see at once that Viola imitated her step-mother, with a taste in dress nearly as unerring as Mrs. Bright's. The elder lady, who could not have been much above thirty, was plainly a mistress of all feminine arts ; her figure was merely encased in her clothes ; her lips were richer than life, her eyes more liquid ; yet she did not seem vulgar. A very little more would have made her so ; but she wore no jewellery, and her gown was exquisitely simple ; she carried herself with an air, but the air was one of dignity. He waited breathlessly for Mrs. Bright to speak, and he found her voice charming. But, unfortunately, she went no farther. She had everything, to the eye, and the ear ; but she confined herself insipidly to the tritest observations upon weather, skating, whether there would ever be frost again in England, mild winters being really pleasant for the poor, the difficulty of obtaining serviceable servants, whether it would rain, the vagaries of the English climate, Hampstead being a nice place, Bank holiday crowds, 'Arries and

'Arriets, and so on. They had all heard them before, and tea was a stolid stranger's meal. The maid, who obviously had not answered the door because she was attending to her mistress's toilet, cleared away; and Mrs. Bright sat glancing at the clock. When it chimed six, Roger thought that he should go, but like most people he was not quite sure how long he was intended to stop. At this moment, however, there was a knock at the front door, and Mrs. Bright rose. They all three stood, in various attitudes, and Mrs. Bright went to the door.

'I . . . ' began Roger.

'No. . . ' Viola put her right hand upon his arm, and allowed it to remain there, while with the forefinger of her left hand she touched her lips.

A man's step sounded in the passage, and went past the door, evidently to the drawing-room, immediately overhead. The maid and Mrs. Bright spoke to each other at the door, and Mrs. Bright went out of the room.

'It's a friend of Agatha's,' Viola said, turning to Roger, with her hand still upon his arm. 'Don't go. If you go I shall be all alone. . . ' Roger resumed his seat. He could not help feeling that this was strange. 'It's . . . it's quite all *right*,' Viola said, looking at him. 'Only I . . . I wanted you to stay and have a talk; and Agatha can talk quite as well with her friend upstairs. . . . I hardly know him. . . . We should all feel awkward. . . .'

She took again the chair by the fire which she had filled when Roger first came, and sighed.

'Come let us sit upon the floor and tell sad stories of the death of kings,' Roger quoted.

'*You* can, if you like,' she said, missing a quotation. 'Too draughty for me. D'you like Agatha? . . . No, I mean, I know she's not your "sort". . . .'

'I think she is magnificent,' Roger cried. 'What is my sort?'

Viola might have named a girl, but, apart from lack of courage, she was strangely unable to do so. She fixed her

eyes upon the fire, and began in a low voice, very slowly.

'A very *good* girl. . . . Good-tempered, and thoughtful . . . and—a—pretty, and . . . not always thinking about money . . . and nicely dressed. . . .'

'But,' said Roger, 'you seem to be describing yourself.'

Viola turned her head and looked at him.

'Do I?' she said in a strange voice. In a moment, almost pettishly, she exclaimed, 'I do wish you'd be serious. I never know when you're serious.'

She was now in another mood altogether, as though she were striving to throw aside her character, and all the hedgings and subterfuges that had gathered up around it. She was unconscious of the aspect of many things in her own nature, but she was quite aware that it did not answer to the points she had claimed for Roger's 'sort'.

'Why not yours as much as anybody else's?' he asked.

'I'm fond of money,' she said, almost with sullenness, as though she had grown ashamed of her god.

'You explained that on Thursday; perhaps you never had a lot.' Roger really did not want to talk about her; but he was staying, and sitting in the chair as though the long evening lay before him like a steamer-trip. Only, instead of a panorama, he had Viola in moods as various as her nature allowed.

'I think of it. . . . And I'm not *good*. . . .'

'What is goodness?' asked jesting Roger. 'I'm not good. Nobody's good. . . . That's the delightful part about them. They're weak, or cunning, or lazy, or indifferent. . . . Hundreds of things. Is that a portrait of you, on the mantelpiece?' Viola brought it, and bent over him, holding it. He could see that her face was fatter and heavier in the photograph, but that her expression was similar. It almost seemed that she had used the same perfume then . . . until he realized how near him she was.

'Thank you,' he said. Viola replaced the photograph, and stood on the hearthrug in her daring striped gown,

slender and perfectly poised. Roger found he could not resist his desire to look at her; he felt a sudden flicker shake his body.

'Agatha's good,' she said. 'But she's stupid. She knows how to dress. . . . She made this dress.'

'It's a beautiful dress . . . I noticed.' For an instant, Viola relapsed into her usual tone with strangers.

'Thought men *never* noticed things like that.' Roger did not reply, so she went on. 'I thought girls dressed to please other girls. I expect that's what *you* think?'

'I've never quite understood it,' Roger admitted. 'I expect it's something deeper than we can understand.'

'Oh,' said Viola, 'I see what you mean. Well, I wore this because you were coming.'

Roger's heart made its presence felt.

'Then you're justified; for I think it's great,' he said, to conclude that matter.

'I knew Agatha would wear her blue dress.'

'Did she *tell* you?' Roger would genuinely have liked to know if they had discussed it.

'I knew that a friend of hers was coming.' Viola was sitting now upon the arm of her chair, with her hand on its back. 'I didn't want her to put me quite in the shade. I know I can't compare with her for looks. It's hard that your step-mother should be better looking than yourself. Don't you think so? I know I'm boring you. . . .'

'I shouldn't have thought you found Mrs. Bright exactly a rival,' Roger said. 'And I'm very comfortable.' She stood up, and came near him, looking down at his smiling face, and biting her lip hard.

'So you're comfortable,' she said, between her teeth. 'Yes, you look it.' She moved away, restlessly. 'Hark at the wind.'

'I like the wind and the rain, and walking over the Heath on a windy wet night . . .' Roger began, and his eyes sparkled. 'When you can't see the sky for clouds, very low down, driving before the wind. D'you like that?'

'I *could* like it,' she said, quietly. 'When I think of the wind now I think of my hair blown about. And rain means mud over your shoes. But I *could* like it.' She was still moving about the room, as though she could not bear to sit quietly by the fire. Roger glanced at her over his shoulder, and she stopped at once. 'I've got the jumps,' she said. 'The wind always gives me them.'

'Would you like me to go?' Roger asked.

'No.' The answer was so blunt that he lay back in his chair. 'I want you to stay,' she said, coming once more to the fire and sitting down. 'I want you to stay, and yet I don't know what to talk about.' She sounded almost out of temper.

'The Pigmies of Patagonia—oat crops ——'

'Don't be a fool! Oh . . . I beg your pardon . . . I didn't mean that. It's . . . it's the wind, making me nervous. Tell me about your office!'

'We're general publishers. Old Cadman, the manager, is an old ass. Old Cinch, the cashier, is another old ass. Agg, the staff-reader, is a young middle-aged ass of anything over thirty. The typists ——'

'What about them?'

'Two charming girls. Miss Jane, or Jeanne, Tender, and Miss Virks. Models of English girlhood ——'

'Like those at the party?' Viola asked.

'Another type. Really, they're very nice girls. . . .'

'Like Mary Amerson?' It was wrenched from her.

'God forbid! Then there's your brother, and Ted Amerson and Jerdow, and a funny old card named Person, who's a great Suffragist and food-reformer. And Gassel, the boy; and—let me see, packers, and so on. Two travellers; one something Morton or Moulton, and the other something Joyce. . . . He's in a good deal.'

'Joyce. . . . Has he got a moustache?'

'D'you know him?' Viola glanced at the door.

'No,' she said. 'I've spoken to him. Don't like him much, do you?'

'Bit of a swanker. I think he's all right. I don't know anything about him.'

'And . . . at your place. . . . You said they weren't strict. . . .'

Roger laughed, and shook his head. They did not speak any further of Tremlett & Grove's. They sat and looked at the fire. Presently, Viola said, in a quick, sudden way:—

'If I change my things, will you go for a walk in the wind?'

Roger was on his feet at once.

'Come on,' he said.

III

Viola was back in a few minutes, in a walking dress, and with a tam-o'-shanter upon her head. Roger lowered the gas, according to her instructions, and they went out into the blustering night. At the first opening of the front door a great wind burst into their faces, and made them cough, but Roger hung on to the door and slammed it before the hall-gas was extinguished. They butted against the wind, knocking against each other and laughing, until they were in a quieter part. Then Viola stopped, and brushed her hair back from her eyes, and prepared to go on.

'You don't mind?' he asked. She shook her head; she could not have spoken.

In a few minutes they were on the Heath, and the trees were making a great low roar, like the sea, and they could see one or two desolate figures being blown along. They went on to the open ground, and Viola was forced to turn her back to the wind at its first gust.

'Blowing me inside out!' she cried.

'Take my arm!' Roger shouted; and thus linked they encountered the breeze. Viola's skirts clung and fluttered, but she panted on with spirit; and Roger, who saw the flying clouds above, and felt the keen biting wind in his lungs, filling them, and making him breathe deep for the luxury,

was in triumph. It seemed to him that they were free of all the world in such weather; and indeed they were alone. In a few minutes, he stopped. 'Too much for you?' 'No,' gasped Viola. 'I like it. It's grand.'

Together they breasted Parliament Hill, and from its summit looked all around into the blackness. They could hear nothing now but the wind. Every sound but that seemed to have been swallowed, and they were quite enclosed by the night.

'Let's sit down a minute,' Viola said, panting. 'I must . . . get my . . . breath.'

They sat, and she still held his arm, clinging to it as though they were still walking in the teeth of the gale. The wind was very strong here; it nearly blew Roger's cap away and he could feel Viola's heart beating like a powerful engine against his arm. He could see over the first black houses a tremendous mass of drifting cloud, racing along at mad speed, and it was too dark to be sure how it was being torn into smaller masses and chased far and wide.

'Isn't it grand?' he exclaimed, looking first at the miserable street-lights that were visible, and then upwards, with the wind switching under his feet and round his head, and into his eyes. 'Got your breath? We'll go back now.' They had the wind behind them as they descended, and he could feel Viola pressing against him as the wind drove them together. They could talk now, without coughing, and they laughed still at the memory of their ascent. Roger was filled with a sense of splendour, of battles and of vigour, for the wind had made the blood run in his veins, and his eyes bright. There was a thrilling note in his voice: he became a boy, unspoilt by offices. And all this Viola felt, as she held his arm and they returned home with the wind behind them.

'Had I *better* come in?' he asked, when they reached the house. She did not release his arm, but opened the door with her key.

'I shan't be a minute,' she said, and left him in the

sitting-room. He walked about, slapping his chest and talking to himself like a boy, and he was still doing this when Viola came back, in her striped dress.

‘Why bless my heart!’ cried Roger. ‘The quickness!’

‘Nobody will know we’ve been out!’ she said. And indeed she was miraculously tidy again. ‘Wasn’t that *splendid*!’

‘You *did* like it? I’m glad. I thought it might have been too blowy.’ He stood laughing over by the fire, and Viola came and stood beside him.

‘I’m not very large,’ she said. ‘But I’m tough. But I had to hold on to you, though.’ Her eyes were bright, and her cheeks flushed. She was obviously exhilarated. ‘I thought we should have been blown away. My heart was beating!’

‘D’you know, I could feel it!’ Roger cried.

‘Not now,’ she said, and took his arm again. He could feel her heart beating more slowly.

‘Yes.’

‘How absurd, isn’t it?’ She relinquished his arm, and stood smiling. Roger saw how pretty she was, and how she stood straight and slender at his side, and he looked down at her eyes, which were almost on a level with his own. The easiness of it, her nearness, the mere fact that the arm lately crooked needed such a little wider crook to embrace her, something in her eyes . . . a hundred things assailed Roger at one moment, and before he knew what was happening, his arm was around her, her hands upon his shoulders and their lips had met. Even then, he did not release her at once, but stood with his arm still tightly pressing her against him, and her cheek against his.

IV

They stood apart again, and looked away, and then at each other.

‘Well,’ Viola said. ‘That’s a nice thing to do!’

'Why did you *make* me?' He was brazen. 'I beg pardon.'

'I wanted you to,' she answered. 'I've wanted you to all the evening.'

'Well, I like that!' cried Roger, all his contrition vanishing.

'Yes, you'd like me to want it; but not to get it . . . or not to say I wanted it. Then I should be a *nice* girl,' Viola said with bitterness.

'But my dear girl! It's a dangerous precedent.'

'Is it?'

'Isn't it?' They reached a dead-lock, and looked at each other. Roger resumed. 'What do you want me to do? Go home, stay here and behave, or what? I'll apologize properly if you like, because I oughtn't to have been a fool. I beg your pardon.'

'I don't want your apologies,' Viola said. 'I wanted you to kiss me. And you *did*.'

Roger looked away from her. He felt sorry, and ashamed, not of his action, but his inability to understand her. But he liked Viola the more for the first piece of conscious candour that he had recognized in her.

'It's not a practice of mine,' he said.

'It's not a habit of mine,' cried Viola. 'Sit down, and I'll tell you. I used to think I only cared about making enough money to live on. I didn't care to have anything to do with boys or men. I thought I should perhaps marry, and then that perhaps I shouldn't. . . .'

She had got thus far when the door opened, and Mrs. Bright came in.

'Oh, you're back,' she said. 'You went out, didn't you?' She looked, from Roger, sitting in the chair, to Viola, standing on the hearthrug. 'Mr. Joyce went. He had to catch a train. . . .'

Roger pricked up his ears. Joyce?

'Will you stay to supper?' Viola asked and shook her head very slightly. Roger protested his inability to stay,

and made preparations for his departure. Viola saw him to the door, keeping a little distance between them. 'Tell you the rest some other time,' she said. 'You could have stayed to supper; but I'd rather you didn't, because I'm afraid you'd show that we'd been kissing each other.'

Her emotion had died down, and she had become quite prosaic again. She gave him her hand in farewell, and he had got to the bottom of the steps outside the house when she darted down them.

'Roger,' she cried. 'You didn't ask when you might come again.'

'No,' he said. 'Am I to? You'll catch cold.'

'Perhaps you don't want to meet me again?'

'Somehow,' he admitted, 'I do, most outrageously.'

'Come next Sunday. . . . Can you?'

'Is that all right?' He began to think her pace tremendous; he thought he could not sustain it.

'Quite!' She was silhouetted for an instant against the light from the open doorway, and then she was gone, while Roger braced himself against the wind.

V

'Now, I *wonder*!' said Roger to himself, as he walked fast, and felt that the wind at least carried rain with it. 'I *wonder*.' He said no more for several minutes, and then he ejaculated, 'What the devil am I to do?' He was excited, he was filled with anticipation of their next meeting; but he was not moved. He was surprised that he felt quite keen and sincere, not at all ashamed, or afraid, or puzzled. It was simply that he had really enjoyed himself, and that he found he liked Viola better than he could have imagined possible. The kissing was nothing. It was altogether negligible, as he could see; but his position was another matter. If he was going to keep on seeing Viola, and if their acquaintance continued on these lines, he must face the question of marriage, which he had always ignored

hitherto, because the possibility seemed so remote. If his next meeting with Viola did not clear matters, then he had two positive alternatives; he could propose to her, or he could stop meeting her. Superficially, those things were plain; actually they were as intricate as could be imagined. He was only earning a hundred and fifty pounds a year, at present; and part of that he gave at home. He had not actually to consider those at home, providing his father's health remained as it was, because Mr. Dennett made quite enough for Roger's mother and Edith to live upon comfortably. But Roger's salary was small for creditable marriage. He knew people married on less, and his own needs were small, but a wife is expensive, unless she is parsimonious. On the other hand, to stop meeting Viola was not merely a question of decision and performance. There had to be considered his own desire, which he could not fathom at the moment; but, far more important still, there was Viola herself. What she would do, could do, or would not do must remain a mystery to him. He did not know her, yet he wanted to be in her company. He did not look upon her without instant reserves and reservations, but he knew that if he loved her these temperamental difficulties would not stand in the way. Over and over again he said to himself 'What does she *want*?' and while (again superficially) this might seem to lie open to guess, he was shrewd enough to believe that Viola was less instinctive than his first impulse might seem to show. Altogether, Roger walked through the wind and rain in a state of mind which gave him little satisfaction. He could see his way through the darkness better than through the difficulties that seemed likely to arise immediately in his life.

VI

Viola, left to herself, stood for a moment in silence, thinking. When she sighed, it was with a quick, shuddering breath, as though the strain had been greater than she

had guessed. Her mouth puckered slightly in the way that, with children, sometimes precedes a fit of crying; but she did not cry, and went back into the sitting-room. Mrs. Bright was sitting in the chair lately occupied by Roger, and her face was in the shadow, as his had been. She leant forward as Viola came into the room, and it could be seen that her large eyes had a perfectly innocent vacancy, entirely sinless, naïve and simple.

‘I like that boy of yours,’ she said. ‘He’s very good-looking.’ Viola did not answer. ‘Mr. Joyce brought me some flowers. Nice of him, wasn’t it. . . . Chrysanthus. . . .’

‘What did he want to come for?’ Viola asked, abruptly. ‘Don’t want him hanging round here.’

‘Well, my dear, he came to see me. . . . I like him. You’re not the only one who likes men-friends.’

‘Don’t be absurd,’ Viola said. ‘You know what happens if you marry again.’

‘Well?’

‘You can’t afford to lose two thousand pounds.’

‘He’s got plenty of money. . . . You’d have part of what your father left. Thousand pounds wouldn’t hurt you with young what’s-his-name.’

Viola stopped in her aimless roaming about the room.

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘If I had a thousand pounds. . . .’

They became silent, and Viola sat down, staring at the fire. The mention of the thousand pounds, half of her father’s bequest to her mother (conditionally upon her permanent widowhood), had revived in Viola’s mind an old notion. Business was business . . . and, Viola’s heart was saying, love was love. She did not colour as she sat there, looking at the fire, but across her quick brain flashed the thought that her love of Roger and her love of business might come into conflict. Slowly, Viola’s eyes closed, as she thought of Roger’s face: such a little while ago she had been in his arms, with her lips returning his kiss. In that moment she had thought that she had become another girl—some ideal girl who stretched her hands to

love and cared nothing at all for the world. What did she feel now? She could still see Roger's face, and feel his arms round her; and her brain was clear and business-like. If she had a thousand pounds. . . . She'd get a share in a business. . . . Roger . . . Roger would have to. . . . A thousand pounds . . . what would Roger say? It was all very well for a man to say he didn't care about money: try him, and see what he said! Roger would be like the others; he wouldn't touch the money (he couldn't, nowadays) . . . she couldn't think that he'd mind, if . . .

Yet at the thought of Roger her hands clenched, and her face softened. She sat quite still in the firelight, going over all they had said. She could remember every word, and she alone knew how every speech marked a stage towards their embrace. The memory stirred her, and made her heart beat fast again; and she forgot business as her thoughts grew full of the other matter.

'Don't sigh like that, girl. . . . Give me the fair old hump, you do,' Mrs. Bright cried at last. 'Every blessed minute. . . . You're as bad as the wind. Making quite a draught.'

CHAPTER VII

MARY'S PRIDE

I

MARY Amerson, being original and modest, was taken by surprise in a way that one of her sisters would not have been. For their heads had been full of suitors for years, and their behaviour had been self-conscious for exactly the same period. They would have seen Septimus Bright's strange agitation, and, innocently, they would have sprung at once to the immediate conclusion. Mary, however, had been otherwise occupied; to her, a lover was something more romantic. She was romantic by temperament, and so she was debarred from speculating about her brothers' friends, who were not romantic. She had thought of a Lohengrin; they, perhaps more conveniently, had looked the whole world in the face and sought human love. Grace had found human love; and Mary shrank from its representative. Mabel had found Moggerson, and with naïve vulgarity, had appropriated him. Mary, on the other hand, saw that neither Tom nor Teddy became engaged, and did not think of love so near home. Since love was a romantic passion, only a pattern knight would receive her approval. She looked innocently at Moggerson—and wondered. He seemed so unlike a lover, with his grey perky face and weary eyes, his smart hat and clothes. Mabel thought him rather a dashing fellow. Grace, on her engagement, was as cool as she might have been five years after marriage, and had no illusions. She was right: Mr. Gower was not romantic, but he was sound. He ate a good dinner, and appreciated it; he liked beer, but was abstemi-

ous; he smoked a pipe and liked dogs; and he kept his money all together in a jingling trouser pocket. There was no insincerity in him; he did not pretend about his money, as Moggerson had to do, but that was because he had as much as he needed, while Moggerson was making thirty-five shillings a week keep him in miraculous clothes. Gower ate steadily; Moggerson was so used to lunching for eightpence that he hardly seemed to want any nourishment. Gower was a steady, sober man of thirty years, who treated Grace rather like intelligent meat; Moggerson was as shy and elusive as any young man can be who keeps himself with difficulty and yet has an instinctive love of dalliance. Neither of these small heroes fired Mary; but she liked Moggerson better than Gower, because Gower so obviously fed without shame, whereas Moggerson was always ready to recognize Mary's sex.

To Mary, then, a proposal from Septimus Bright was horrible. She did not dislike him; she rather liked him, because he was quiet and self-conscious. His self-consciousness fed her vanity by making her feel that she understood his behaviour. She hardly noticed that he talked about himself whenever he talked at all; she had even coaxed him once or twice when she saw that only pride prevented his joining the others in some expedition. The coaxing had brought about Bright's ruin, for Mary's coaxing was very fresh and delightful. The first time, he had flushed deeply, and looked at her from his dark, unreadable eyes with a strange cramped expression, as though his arms had been bound to his sides, and as though he were shot through and through with the knowledge of his bondage. A curious thought had entered his mind; it had recurred to him later, constantly, worrying him. It had grown greater, a mastering thought that chained his impulses; every fresh thing Septimus saw added a weight to the chain of his self-consciousness, until he could hardly move in any matter without feeling that the world watched. The thought, once established as his

familiar, became like a witch's black dog, and a cold unwavering steady love for Mary settled like a black frost upon him. He thought people laughed at him, and sometimes turned offendedly upon his heel, to find their eyes and tongues otherwise bestowed; whenever he saw Mary the chill surge of his feelings swept through him like steel, and made his heart cold. It was never a warm-hearted love, but cold and all-engrossing; there was nothing fierce or generous about his love, it became like a hoarded treasure, which he, like a miser, poured secretly through his fingers. But it was not mere avarice, or desire. It was selfish, and engrossing; but it was metal.

Mary, finding herself indoors on the evening of the concert, was thrown into a nervous confusion. She thought she had been rude, when she should have been grateful. Lying in bed, she tried to gather up the various words she had heard and piece them together into some intelligible proposal. Her heart thrilled; she had never been valuable before. He loved her—absurd! It was ridiculous to think that she could inspire love. Why, love was so sacred a thing—if she thought she might be loved, she should be the happiest girl alive. It would make everything she did like some beautiful act of service. It was horrible, at the same time—Septimus Bright! She couldn't call him Septimus! He—she didn't *like* him! She didn't dislike him, though. He was not asking for her friendship, he was asking for herself. Involuntarily, Mary shuddered. Septimus was like a dark silent pool, that made you shrink away at thought of its cold depth, and the dank slipperiness of its sides. Yet he was like that pool, too, in the fact that you must timidly, with many hesitations and withdrawals, approach on tip-toe, and look in, reaching your hand back for some other safe hand to clasp. She would like to see deep into his soul; but his eyes gave her no understanding. Like Viola's eyes, they hid all that was in them; they could only express the most obvious emotions, such as interest, or seriousness of mood; you could never find in

them a true image of the mind or the heart. She could see herself in them, very small and clear.

She tried to think out her feelings, and could not. She had said 'No'—Poor Septimus! Her heart was on his side, full of pity; she had never refused anything to anybody, and to begin by refusing the highest thing she knew was indeed hard. Even in her confusion, Mary found herself laughing nervously at the idea that anybody should love her. It seemed strange when other people treated her carelessly. It suddenly threw the general attitude into relief; she remembered many things in a flash, and they all stood clear in her mind. She thought that Septimus did not know her; she did not know him. What did he know of her? Yet she had only been startled at the suddenness of it; she had no dislike of Septimus; he was an unknown force, but he attracted her, shrinkingly. . . . He loved her.

II

The following morning, Mary rose before it was light because breakfast had to be prepared early and Mrs. Canna, the charwoman, came on Fridays. She called Tom and Ted as she went down the stairs, and was soon joined by Mabel. Together they laid the table and started to make the huge dishes of bacon and eggs which sent the male Amersons forth into the cold world in a fit state to repel the winds of November. Mabel put out marmalade in a big cut-glass bowl (the Amersons never had any other sweet dish in the morning), and as she watched the little streaks of simulation orange peel, she was reminded irresistibly of Moggerson. Why this should have been, even Mabel would have found it hard to explain, unless the reason was that Moggerson's tweed suit had orange-coloured lines which, in their transverse arrangement, created an apparent check.

'So funny,' she said to Mary. 'Bert Moggerson was so comical last night 'bout Ted's recitation. And there was

that fellow that sang—he took him off till I nearly choked. He *is* comical, Mary.'

'I wonder why he wasn't singing,' Mary went on, almost interested. 'I suppose he doesn't know Mr. Jerdow. I'm sure he'd have been better than that awful man who sang the "Bedouin".'

'Nce. . . . I don't know why he didn't sing. He makes you *roar*,' Mabel said. 'Shall I tell you what he said about Viola Bright? He said she'd got her eye on Roger. . . . I said, "Oo, I don't know if she'll get him". He laughed.' Mabel did not notice Mary's look of disgust at this delightful passage; but went on counting the places at table, and then proceeded to her bread-cutting, while Mary went back again to the kitchen. She thought: 'Even Viola Bright's not so horrible!' And her mind was full of her proposal, so that her cheeks grew slowly red.

First Grace appeared languidly, then Tom, then Mr. Amerson, and lastly Ted, yawning aloud.

'Come on, Mary!' called Ted. 'Waiting!' He knocked the knife and fork handles on the table.

'Here, you wait a bit,' Grace said, beside him. Tom Amerson was reading a letter that had come by the last post on the previous night; Mr. Amerson stared in front of him, as though he did not see the others. They all sat round the large table with its snowy cloth, and Grace and Ted could, by dodging, see themselves in the mirror belonging to the mahogany sideboard. To enjoy a similar privilege Mabel had to turn round, which was always a nuisance. Tom did not care about his face, once he had approved the reflection in his bedroom glass.

'What d'you wear these frilly things for?' Teddy asked Mabel. 'Anybody would think it was May Day.'

'Anybody'd think you hadn't got any manners,' Mabel retorted. 'Cause I like them, that's why.'

'Floppy . . . like antimacassar.' Mabel's blouse was an excuse for a number of hanging decorations that jiggled

when she moved. She pushed her hair from her forehead with irritation.

'Always quarrelling,' Grace put in. 'Every meal-time's a squabble.'

'You're a nice one to talk,' Mabel cried, crimson. 'You've got the temper of an angel.'

'At least, I'm not a cat,' Grace's clear cold eyes stared back at her equally angry sister.

'That's just what you *are*. . . . Putting in your ——'

Tom cut in with a rebuke at this point.

'Can't you be quiet? It's like having breakfast in the Zoo! Here, Mary—I want my breakfast!' Having relieved his feelings he went on: 'I suppose you know the meaning of antimacassars? At one time everybody used to use macassar oil ——' He sometimes descended to the family circle, with such general information.

Fortunately, Mary brought in the breakfast, and at the same time the postman's knock was heard. Mabel slipped out of the room.

'For you, Father.' Mr. Amerson's head jerked, and his eyes were brought back suddenly to the letters she held. A look of shame for his absence of mind passed across the father's face. Mechanically he took the letters, and put them down on the table beside his plate.

'What's up with Father?' Teddy whispered. Tom looked coldly across the table at his brother.

'Business,' he said, shortly. He told himself he felt the strain quite as much. There was no doubt that his father was getting old . . . he didn't, somehow, seem to have the old grip of things. . . . In that compartment of his brain, Tom kept many hidden thoughts, and some of them were ambitious, for he was both the eldest son and his father's understudy at the office. The whole affair needed careful handling, he saw; he wanted to have shown his capability before his father retired, and he knew that the day of retirement would not be long delayed now. The question was largely economic; he wondered what the firm would

do with his father, an old servant, and a loyal one. These things wanted careful discussion. He would have to have a chat with Father, and set everything straight. The trouble was that the old man was very close about his own affairs, and Tom was still afraid of his father. But he could put on an air with Teddy, a junior and an inferior.

'Father,' said Mary, 'you're not eating anything.'

Mr. Amerson slowly looked at her and smiled. Then he started his breakfast. Somehow his smile struck her with dismay. Later, she wondered if he had heard the argument which had been quite audible in the kitchen. If he had, what did her father think of his family? She caught sight of Mabel's red face, and glanced aside at Grace, who was eating peacefully. Teddy was framing words with his mouth, rehearsing. Tom, having cleared his throat, was eating with an air of condescension. She had never thought of it before, but it came into her head now that it would be wonderfully nice to escape from all this bickering. There was something about Tom and Grace that set her toes tapping with irritation.

'Oh, for goodness' sake keep your feet still, somebody!' cried Grace.

III

When the men had gone, Mrs. Amerson appeared, with her dress undone at the back, trailing. She wandered about, regardless of her disarray, until Grace put the matter right; and then Mrs. Amerson sat on the edge of her chair.

'Now girls,' she said, yawning slightly. 'Don't forget Mrs. Canna's coming. I'm sure that woman's not steady.' Her soft, grieving voice was filled with dismal satisfaction. 'She drinks . . . it's so hard to get a reliable charwoman. They're so independent. I'm sure, when I was a girl, they were quite different sorts of women. I used to think to myself . . . now if I were ever . . . reduced in life, there are very few things I'd be before I'd . . .' Her mind went away to these exquisite days. 'See, what was I saying?'

'Some old twaddle about when you were a girl,' Mabel muttered, too low to be heard. Nobody else took any notice. Mrs. Amerson looked round the breakfast-room, and saw that 'Dignity and Impudence,' an engraving of a famous picture, had tilted to one side. She went and rearranged it, sweeping an old spoon off the mahogany side-board as she moved. This room was her favourite. For one thing, the furniture was exactly what it had been when she was married, since the red velvet seats of the substantial chairs had been renewed in the original shade. 'My 'ome,' she had always called it. The wallpaper was very dark, with long leaves of autumnal red and brown, and a faint suggestion of old gold tracery. The frames to the pictures were made of light, polished wood, and the ornaments (including some on the mantelpiece, on which cubes of glass hung, and sometimes clinkled) were what she loved. It was a large room, with a well-worn carpet of an unpleasant colour which had faded from a deep green. Everything was very solid, and it had the dinginess that old-fashioned people associate with comfort. The Amerasons all considered it ideal; the cousins envied them. 'Got such a *lot* of furniture,' the cousins said. 'Massive! Oo I do like that *old* furniture. . . . What I mean, *old* furniture's valuable. Real me'ogany!'

And this was what Mrs. Amerson surveyed, with a clouded mind. 'My 'ome.' Not anybody else's home, but hers. Hers to move a chair, if she wanted; hers to have the carpet up, if she took a fancy that way. Vaguely, it was all in her mind, like remembered bells; just as thoughts of 'my boys' or 'my daughter Grace' were jostling there among what Teddy, with excellent humour, called the 'grey matter.' Mrs. Amerson had as yet produced from among her jumble of ideas respect for only one of her daughters; and that respect dated deliberately from Grace's engagement. The fact brought back youth to the world—Mrs. Amerson's world of grey phantoms and grievances. She could think all sorts of strange wild incoherent things

about Grace's future. Before it had been 'my Tom' or 'my Teddy,' because she feared Tom, and loved Teddy, in opposition to his father, who did not love Teddy. Now, there were three fine fellows in the family, and Mabel was gradually emerging as a fourth because of her likeness to her mother. Mrs. Amerson found Moggerson a very pleasantly-spoken young man. It was a pity he wasn't well off, like Grace's Edwin; but he must rise in the world. Mary was nothing. Mrs. Amerson had not even the energy to bully her, although some mothers believe in bullying a particular daughter; so she had a faint family affection for Mary. It was an understood thing that she loved them all equally; each member of the family, in fact, loved all the others equally. They knew that blood is thicker than water, and that all relations quarrel, loving each other patiently all the time, through every row. And it was pleasant to them all to think how happy they were, *under* it all. *Under* it all—'it' being superficial disagreement and incompatibility—they had that deep, unselfish love, distributed evenly, which welds large families together. It was almost beautiful to think that the evenness of regard was an impregnable rock upon which the fortunes of individuals were founded. It assured them of the solidarity of all pleasant things. Mrs. Amerson loved to remember it, just as she took joy in the sameness of the houses in Marjorie Road, or just as she had, in early days, dressed the three girls exactly alike from head to foot. She sat in the breakfast-room (sometimes called the dining-room, or, by the cousins, the dahnin'-room), thinking of all these things, with her plump hands folded. She knew that all the time she was directing the girls in their work, and when Mrs. Canna came she would hurry to make sure that all was well. She was full of a satisfied sense of the daily-ness of her existence. What was it she had thought of that morning? She had been meaning to speak to Mary about that coffee stain in Mary's pink silk . . . the girl couldn't go about without a best frock.

IV

So Friday went, and Saturday, with its multitude of tradesmen's boys with little books, and rattling feet, and thunderous knocks. The girls were kept busy, but Grace escaped some of the busy-ness because she was going out with Edwin Gower. They were going to a matinée, to the pit, because Gower was too much accustomed to the possession of money to be reckless in booking seats. They were going to see a discreet sentimental costume play about the mistresses of a dissolute monarch. Mabel longed to go with them; she had a picture postcard of the monarch (as represented on the stage) standing on her mantelpiece. They were going because it was a 'nice' play, with nothing unpleasant in it. The Amersons liked 'nice' plays, and 'nice' girls, because they said these took their minds away from squalid realities; it was their form of drug-taking. They were always among those who laughed aloud when anybody said 'damn' on the stage, because 'damn' on the stage is a very humorous word: Grace would have rebuked anybody who used it in her hearing, while Mabel, more consistent, giggled for a repetition when Moggerson burnt his finger with a match. The definite mention of obstetrics shocked them, and made them vulgar in denunciation; but sentimental plays hovering all the time round delicious vice, musical plays with hordes of maidens ministering to young men with *double entente*, magnificently sexual plays in which early sin was wiped out by ten minutes of abject penitence, these things lifted them out of the rut, and sent them back to squalid realities to face them for a further period. So when Grace arranged to go to this play she knew that there would be nothing to make her uncomfortable—nothing about eugenics, or child-bearing, or heredity. Those ugly plays, with ugly subjects were simply useless. The Amersons went to the theatre to be amused. Tom Amerson had once been to an Ibsen play. 'I wasn't amused,' he said. 'The business of a play is to amuse.

... If I want to *learn* anything I can get it from my Chambers's.' Mrs. Amerson had been with him. 'I should be sorry,' she told her girls, 'for any daughter of mine to see such a play.' And she proceeded to outline the story of the play to her daughters.

Later in the day, over a postponed tea, Grace related the plot of 'Charlie is My Darling,' to the satisfaction of all.

She was pleasant enough to say, in response to their felicitations:—

'You ought to go. Why don't you and Mary go, Mabel? There are matinées on Wensdays.'

Mary and Mabel exchanged a glance.

'I haven't got any money,' Mary said, bluntly.

Mr. Gower looked across at her, and laughed aloud.

'Oh,' he said. 'You ought to get a young man to take you. That's the wheeze.'

'Yes,' Grace added, stung by the suggestion of penuriousness. 'I should tell Roger Dennett you want to go.'

Mary sat quite still with her face pale, and her heart jumping.

'Yes . . . or Septimus Bright,' Mabel put in, laughing. 'I'm sure he'd take you.'

'Eh?' Gower arched his brows, and pretended to whistle. 'Two strings to her bow, has she?'

'I should ask the oil-boy,' suggested Teddy, joining in the fray.

Mary's mouth opened, and she tried to speak.

'Wouldn't *you* like to take us, Teddy?' Mabel said, coming to the rescue. There was a laugh, because the two Amerson boys never went out with their sisters.

'Perhaps Teddy would give us the money to go,' Mary said, in a strained voice, trying to choke back her anger by being ironic. There was another general laugh.

'I'm sure *that* can be managed,' cried Grace, 'anybody'd think we were starving!'

'I am,' Teddy shouted and made a grab at the bread-and-butter plate. 'Don't know about you; but I want my

tea. I've got to get off to a rehearsal. Any more tea going, Grace?'

Mary's heart became less painfully active, and she sat trying to put her anger away from her. 'It doesn't matter . . . it doesn't matter,' she told herself. 'I'm a silly to take any notice. I oughtn't to have said that about the money. It's my own fault; they don't mean anything.' Then a sudden blaze of anger enlightened her. 'They can't *help* it. . . . They think it's funny.'

'Look at Mary!' Grace cried. 'Getting over it!' She laughed very lightly, high up, as she did when she wanted to hurt.

'Leave her alone!' Teddy expostulated.

Mary's cheeks were red again, she felt her heart beating in her throat. She couldn't bear it. Anything was better than this. All her mind seemed to run away, and all her heart to take a blind leap into the vague future. Just as a horse sometimes stops dead, and ignores every persuasive effort of his driver, so Mary turned blind, and forgot all wisdom.

'Perhaps you'd like to know,' she said, with her voice shaking and flaring, 'that I'm going to marry Mr. Bright!' And with that she ran out of the room.

V

'I say, I say,' ejaculated Gower, with his eyebrows arched still higher.

'*Good heavens!*' cried Grace.

'La, la, la!' said Teddy. Mabel giggled and clapped her hands together, looking round at the closed door. They all stared at each other.

'Did *you* know, Mabel?' Grace demanded.

'I never knew! She hasn't said a word. Not a *word!*'

'Ah, kept close about it!' Gower nodded sharply, and leant back in his chair. 'That's one way o' doin' things.'

'Oh, she *is* a little deceiver,' Grace said, bitterly. 'She's

so quiet, you don't know what she's doing. I *quite* thought it was Roger Dennett.'

'Oo, he's going about with Viola Bright . . . ' Mabel explained. 'Least, they were at the concert together. I never thought . . .'

'These *girls*!' ejaculated Gower, winking at Teddy. 'Eh!' His own red face and slow eyes did not lead one to expect a deep understanding of girls; but he claimed a knowledge that served him. 'They don't tell *all* they think.'

'Shouldn't think we *did*!' laughed Mabel.

'Mabel! But I can't understand it.'

'Oh, he's been here a good deal. . . . Oo, I know! Thursday night he came home with her. I never noticed anything. . . . I was—a—I was walking in front, with Bert Moggerson.'

'Oh *well*!' said Gower, archly. 'Couldn't expect you to notice much!' He laughed his uproarious guffaw.

'You *are* awful!' Mabel became 'red as red' (as she would say).

'I *quite* thought it was Roger Dennett. . . . What did she want to sit next him at supper for? Can't make that out. . . .' Grace marvelled at the subtlety of Mary's methods.

'To bring the other one *on*, of course!' shouted Gower. 'You don't seem to think, my girl. Now, to me, it's as plain as . . . well, I won't say *what*!'

'Well, she *is* a funny girl!' Grace persisted. 'Fancy it coming out like *that*! I wonder how long she'd have kept it to herself. Thursday night . . . why, it's two days.'

'Perhaps she's kidding you!' Gower began playing with his moustache. 'She's a smart little kid, and no mistake. Pretty, too.'

'You be quiet!' Grace said, humorously.

'I knew all about it. . . . I knew he was gone on her. . . . It's as plain as Gower!' cried Teddy.

'Here, I say!' Gower pretended to be very much dis-

turbed. 'Nothing the matter with my face, is there, Grace?' Grace looked at him possessively: there was no doubt about him in her mind.

'Shouldn't marry you if there was!' she asserted, definitely.

Gower leaned over and put his arm round her. Mabel watched, laughing, while Gower kissed Grace's ear. They all felt very much amused at this unexpected piece of information.

It suddenly occurred to Mabel that *she* was the only one of the girls now who was not affianced. Of course, Bert Moggerson . . .

Sometimes, deep in her heart, Mabel was *afraid* . . .

VI

To Mary, hurrying from the others to solitude in the kitchen, the situation was tragic. Again and again she said to herself: 'How *could* I. . . . It's not *true*!' But that took her no farther. She was committed definitely, irretrievably, to this state of things. It had been a momentary insanity; she had been false to every idea of truth that she possessed. It was done. She said: 'They've driven me to it. . . . *They're* the ones to blame,' and stood in the silent kitchen, looking at the shining fender, on which warm pools of light from between the fire bars seemed to lie. She could ask nobody for help; she could not even go to anybody in the house and talk about indifferent things, for her mother and Gran'ma were the only persons in the house who had not heard her declaration. It was terrible! She stood looking at the fender, her ears strained, her hands clenched; and she felt hatred for herself. The colour in her cheeks was fiery, and her face burned so that it hurt. She felt she had been mean, contemptible . . . slowly the tormenting thought came, even silly. Her mouth puckered as if for a fit of crying, but she *would* not cry. It was too petty, too childish for tears. . . . She would have to tell

Septimus. . . . If she could have summoned up the courage to go back and deny it, she would gladly have done so; but there was no possibility of that. She could not go back; she could only go forward. Nobody could go back; everything she did was one more hesitating step along an unknown path that closed again behind her. Everything was a humiliation . . . to be laughed at was the greatest humiliation of all. To be laughed at! '*They've* driven me to it,' she muttered, fierce in her contempt. 'Oh, but how *could* I say it.' Self-horror seized her. 'I'm worse than they are!' she thought. 'They're only horrible, but I'm *wicked*!' Passionately, she began to move about the room, still with her hands clenched, taking strange jerking steps in one direction and another. It was strange nobody came, she thought. How she hated them all! How she hated herself! 'But *they're* the ones to blame!' she said aloud; and gave a bitter shake of the head.

All her life she had been trying to please them. She remembered that she had been getting up before the others—like a servant—for years in order that they might not have to wait at all for their breakfast; she had been working hard and willingly all her life to give them pleasure, to make everything nice to see and to touch. She had forgone pleasures herself, in order that they might be satisfied. To Grace and Mabel she had been a help, and over and again had unselfishly done work that they disliked; she had done it until they had come to look on the work as hers by privilege. And she had never grumbled, even when she resented their attitude. She had always crushed down the feelings of rebellion, because they were so useless—she had said 'What's the *use* of making a fuss?' and she had known that nothing would be altered, because there was no judge. Nobody considered Mrs. Amerson, except to keep her out of the way as much as possible; they all tried to make up for her habit of interference by getting through as much work as they could while she was otherwise occupied. Yet with it all they were not united. Grace was selfish and disin-

clined to do anything at all since her engagement; Mabel was lazy and spasmodic, stopping every minute to talk about some trivial thing so as to waste the time. It had always been so; Mary could not remember a time when the major part of the work had not been done by herself. She said she had been a slave, working from morning to night with no recompense; and she *must* escape from it all. Here was a means of escape!

Yet it was impossible to think of marriage with somebody she only did not dislike. It was . . . '*They've* driven me to it . . . I can't stop here!' Then she thought she might get work elsewhere. What work could she do? She couldn't do anything but be a servant, and that was no better than what she *was* doing now. She would marry Septimus Bright. She didn't dislike him. She liked him . . . oh, *very* much. He was kind, and serious; she knew that he was not always at his ease with others, but that made him not unattractive . . . it comforted her against that other feeling that he was secretive, almost mysterious. She liked people to be frank, and he did not seem to be frank. But perhaps he would become so when she knew him. Oh, but if she really cared for him she could not think in this way at all! But it was a way out of her sudden horror of the Amerson régime. . . . If she could explain to Septimus. What could she explain? You couldn't say to a young man: 'I don't love you; but you offer a means of escape from a life I hate, so I'll marry you!' At least, a self-respecting young man would not want to be an alternative! The difficulty was beyond her grasp. She could not understand herself; she had never, until the night of the party, felt an active grievance. It had all begun on the night of the party; she had felt different ever since then—different, and, somehow, rebellious. On the night of the party she had definitely broken with the old way. Some feeling for freedom had arisen in her then! She had begun to touch a new individuality. It must be her own fault; she wasn't well, perhaps . . . she was morbid. Roger had said she wasn't

morbid. Roger! She thought of him for the first time. She saw his steady eyes looking at her. He would despise her—Well! Whatever happened, he would do that! She bullied herself roughly into believing it. He didn't *understand*, he saw everything aslant; he'd never been unhappy, never been forced into weakness. He hadn't the same trials; a man never had! A man went his free way, rejoicing. A girl had always to suffer. She had suffered too long; nothing could be worse than this! And she had plunged! To keep her pride undamaged before the others, she must humble herself to Septimus; she must accept the love he so earnestly offered. Other girls married without love . . . Grace didn't love Mr. Gower! She *couldn't*. It wasn't love. It was just liking. She liked Septimus as much as that . . .

So with persuasions did Mary bring herself to that step which should have been taken voluntarily, freely. So she prepared to sacrifice her lover no less than herself. They were both to fall before the tyranny of suburban manners and suburban pride.

VII

Septimus Bright knocked at the Amersons' front door, his heart beating rather fast, and his lips dry and pale with emotion. When Mary opened the door he made an incoherent effort to greet her without embarrassment. He saw her face quite white, as she leaned back against the wall, away from him. Mary closed the door, and they stood, facing each other in the dim light of the hall gas. Everything else seemed dark to Septimus, but Mary's paleness drew his eyes and held them; he watched her mouth, and saw that the blood in her lips seemed to have spread, so that it had filled the faint line that divides the lip from the white flesh surrounding it. Everything in her expression pointed to her unhappiness. He held her hand still, and she suffered it to remain.

'Mary!' he said. 'Haven't you anything to say to me?'

Mary's eyes were still lowered. She could not have looked at him. But slowly and fumblingly words came from her lips. . . .

'I've been . . . thinking,' she whispered. 'I want to . . .' She stopped.

'I've been thinking of you all the time,' Septimus said, and drew her nearer to him. 'I've been thinking too. Mary, I've been . . . I've been *praying* that you'd change your mind.'

A shock went through Mary at the word 'praying'. It outraged her ; but she was bent on their destruction. In this hour of madness she became keen with the need of self-preservation. She would have sacrificed her dearest friend to her pride at this moment, her dearest thought.

'I've changed my mind,' she said in a hard voice, and without compunction. 'I want to be engaged to you.'

She felt his arm round her, and his harsh face against hers. She returned his kiss just as Teddy opened the dining-room door and appeared in the hall.

'My word !' Teddy said, in an awed whisper, and crept back into the dining-room. And, fiercely, Mary felt a thrill of pride run through her, struggling with her poignant shame and self-contempt.

CHAPTER VIII

MR. AMERSON GROWN OLD

I

IT had become the custom for Jerrard Amerson and Tom to leave the house together in the morning, and to travel together to the office; and on this Monday morning they followed custom without any more than instinctive pre-arrangement. They walked along the road slowly, with Tom about eighteen inches in front of his father, very stiff and silent. Both wore tall-hats and frock-coats which they removed at the office; and Tom had the advantage of height only because Mr. Amerson stooped slightly. Neighbours timed themselves by the two Amersons: if the Amersons were near the end of the road, the neighbour who saw them would ejaculate, 'I'm late'; if they were not in sight at all the neighbour would hurry along until he could see them or until a sure clock permitted him to know that he was early. They never spoke to each other, and they read different newspapers: Mr. Amerson had taken to one with pictures, Tom bought one that gave him 'sound' opinions on the Conservative side. He said, if any question of news or fact arose at the office, 'Wait a minute . . . I'll see what *my* paper says'. A moment later, he would add: 'Yes . . . here you are. . . . As I *said*. . . .' He would proceed to read the passage aloud. 'Where did *you* see it?' he would ask. 'Oh *that* thing . . . I think *my* paper's the more reliable. These ha'penny papers'll say anything. No. I've *noticed*! They have to appeal to the mob. I like something *sound*.'

The office in which they worked was incredibly noisy and dirty. They went up stone stairs, and met dirty boys in greasy aprons, with cans, and slices of bread and butter

wrapped in newspaper. The grinding of machines filled the air, and telephone bells rang continuously. Mr. Amerson's office lay beyond the inquiry desk, a mere hutch, and Tom was in the outer office, at a separate table. Everything was greasy or black with smudges from inky fingers; holes gaped in the bare uneven floor; files of worknotes or dockets hung dustily against the walls; all was aged, and staggering with the tremors of the heavy machines. It seemed like the veriest makeshift office, with pigeon-holes above the broken mantelpiece, and an old calendar hung awry. On the gas brackets the dust was thick and black; the handles were broken off drawers; the gas-shade in Mr. Amerson's hutch was made out of dirty paper. One would have thought that the firm would be moving the following week, as though their tenancy was not long enough to make any cleaning or comfort desirable. Some people thought the office picturesque, but that was because they imagined that dirt was the beginning of beauty: they would point to the beauty of London as arising from filth, and to this office as supplying an example of irregular beauty, of freedom from control. The Amersons had grown used to it, and had no thought of any artistic theory; they took life as it came, and satisfied themselves as to facts. They had to work so hard, so quickly to settle a thousand matters of detail, to keep so much work abreast of time, and to keep so closely in touch with the agitations of their customers, that the work absorbed all their attention. Thus it was that, even when they used the telephone, they did not notice the rumbling of machines or the slamming of doors, or the wild filth of the messenger boys. In the winter, and they were now at the beginning of winter, the business was truly like a romance, for the evenings fell early, and the gases were lighted, and orders and checkings and letters to their country branch (where most of the printing was done) had to be attended to without loss of nerve. It was an extraordinary training in self-control; they had to keep their heads cool, and their

memories fresh. A mistake might mean a disaster, yet so good was the routine that mistakes of importance seldom occurred. The routine itself, with its fascinating suggestion of busy-ness, of an endless activity, seized Tom Amer-son as soon as he began work at the office; when he left at night, he walked quickly and jauntily, with his mind running back over the day's labour. And it confirmed him in his self-esteem; he had no time to be discontented with his lot or with himself. He developed 'manner'; he was never wrong—it became his pride that he was never wrong. At the office, he said, 'You'll find it under C, Mr. Snuggs,' or 'Harry . . . I want you to check these figures, . . .' or 'I think you'll find I'm *right*,' and the knowledge that he was always right, full of a splendid accuracy, made and consolidated his ambition. While others talked of social reform, or of vegetarianism, or of this man or that, Tom smiled. 'That's all very well,' he would say. 'I've got no time for that sort of thing. D'you know what our turn-over was last year?' Economics found him steady; he was admirably keen on the official figures of 're-exports'. He remarked the fluctuation of the cotton trade. He was definite upon the number of ships in the British fleet. 'I'm talking about those we could put into action,' he would say. 'Oh, but you'll find it *is* so.' And it was good solid British work that made him what he was. It was the sense that he could send a boy out, and say to the manager, 'He's gone out for me, Mr. Wolson,' without being questioned further, that gave Tom his first feeling of power. When he reached the point of saying, over the telephone, 'That's all right, Mr. Tenn, I'll give my personal promise you shall have them,' he touched a consciousness of supreme manhood. Publishers, sitting with agitated minds in their own offices, used to say: 'Get me Dickertons on the 'phone. . . . Ask for Mr. Amerson *junior*!' Every time Tom received such a call, his eyes used to contract, which was the only sign he gave of the knowledge of power which rose in his breast.

II

Old Mr. Amerson would sometimes sit in his hutch staring straight before him. He had been as active as Tom all his life, and now his memory was failing, and he had to put a strain upon his mind to bring it round to a definite object. He found he could not read the news because it made him angry. 'Fools!' he heard himself saying. 'Criminal fools.' He found he could not endure his wife's endless talk about the sicknesses of endless Amersons. He had struggled against it for a long time, had forced himself to read the pages, and checked his anger. . . . Then he had forgotten what he had just read. 'That's bad,' he had said. Or, again, he had tried to humour his wife, coldly, because she bored him; but with an effort to understand one who was becoming each day more of a stranger to him. 'Alice,' he had said, at last, 'what the devil's the good of telling me all this?' In a second, the deluge was upon him. 'Treated like a servant in my own house . . . never see anything of you . . . anybody would think. . . . Selfish life, not interested in your family. . . . The children . . .' He shuddered when he thought of it. Slowly his understanding had forced itself upon his attention. He disliked his wife, his mind could not grasp the details of his business, he was growing old. For too many years his business had been everything to him, so that he had never been free from it. The business had gone everywhere with him. In the train this morning, while his eyes read his paper, his mind was going over details of work in hand; in bed, when he had tried to sleep, he had puzzled over the behaviour of a publisher who so obviously was giving him less work than of old, and he calculated how much money he should require for the next month for his home expenses, for the renewal of his insurance policy, for Grace's trousseau. He now sat thus silently in the office going over all these things, over and over again, wondering how it was that he was losing grip, feeling that his eyes were weaker, that his strength was failing him. 'I'm sick . . . sick . . . sick of it!' he groaned.

'Five-pounds-three-and-four, Frabb's bill was. . . . Had to order coals. His cousin had asked for the loan of twenty pounds. Ten-twelve . . . ' He couldn't remember Merrill's manager's name. . . . He was getting old, like some old dog that couldn't see its way across the room. Supposing he 'went,' what would they do? Yes, supposing he went. . . . There was nothing to come. Dickertons might make his wife a present; Tom would step into his shoes; the house in Marjorie Road was his; Grace was going to be married; Tom and Ted were earning enough to keep them. There remained his mother, Mary and Mabel, and . . . his wife. Otherwise, nothing. His expenses had been too great for savings; his wife — By God! she was a bad manager! Tasteless. . . . And what had he been himself? 'I've been too busy,' he muttered. 'I can't see to everything.' He had come gradually to be respectful to Tom—Tom, whom he had snubbed when he was younger!—and Tom was a good lad. . . . At times. . . . Mr. Amerson's feet tapped. . . . 'Contemptuous?' he half said aloud. He was the only one in the family with any sense! . . . Ted was a buffoon . . . a failure . . . a soft, half-baked fool! In his bitterness, Mr. Amerson actually thought definitely of Ted in these terms. He could not rely on Ted for anything. Tom was his hope. Tom was the best brain of the family . . . he was getting a useful lad. When he looked back upon his life, there was really not a great deal to show for it! Yet in his day he had been energetic . . . he could remember old Mr. Dickerton (who had been dead for fifteen years) saying, 'You're the best man we've got, Amerson,' and his eye still kindled at the recollection of the praise. . . . Yes, at that time . . . at that time. . . . He could remember, at that time. . . . It was different now. What was it he wanted to remember? He wanted to remember something. There was something he wanted to remember. . . .

An hour passed, and Mr. Amerson still sat at his desk trying to remember something. He seemed to feel in his head strange shapeless masses contracting and expanding,

pulsing steadily in a slow measure, now large, now small, slowly, slowly. If he could only understand what they were, he would not mind! They seemed so formless, so impossible, at one time like jellyfish, at another, like nothing at all, growing large, and small, large, and slowly again small. If he could grasp them, if he could understand their nature, he would not mind; but they frightened him, in their silent gaping terror. It was the nothingness of them that frightened him, the feeling that they were not really there, advancing and receding, the suspicion that he could not really see them or feel them. If they would only stop. He *would* stop them! He strained his eyes at the light, and his mouth yawned open. Nothing seemed to matter. . . . He felt very tired and ill, with those wonderful shapeless masses slowly swaying and changing in his mind, over and over again, steadily swaying and lolling, very slow, impossible to be grasped. Horrible in their languid movements, they fascinated him, so that his lower jaw hung down, and his eyes stared fixedly at the light, wide and unseeing.

So they found him sitting alone, and when they spoke he answered indistinctly, in a sort of grumbling inarticulate murmur. They asked him if he was ill, and he said he would be all right in a moment, if they left him alone. Then they told Tom, who came at once into the hutch, and put questions for a moment. Mr. Amerson was still indistinct, far away, like one roused from sleep. With any other member of the staff, they would have thought the cause might be drink, for Mr. Amerson's head hung and rolled slightly as he spoke; but they knew that this was illness, though drink is always the first guess of an Englishman as to the cause of physical failure. So Mr. Amerson was hastily taken home in a taxi-cab, and a doctor was summoned.

III

Roger Dennett reached the office on this Monday morning in a bad temper. He loathed work, and he loathed

people. He was suffering from one of his periodical dislikes of Agg, who was a snob; and when he saw Person come into the room he looked upon him with a cold and savage eye. Person never noticed a thing of that sort: he was far too busily engaged in the exploration of his own mind to consider the aspect of human beings. Person had been bred a Methodist, with the result that when he reached years of independence he became first an Atheist and then a Humanitarian—these being the inevitable stages of a nature essentially religious which had been early prejudiced against Christian teaching. He came blinking into the room nervously, with a sort of twitching and absurd modesty. Roger, being already in an irritable mood, felt a frenzy rising in him.

‘Sagacious one,’ he said, ‘Avaunt!’

‘Dennett . . . you . . . I’ve been thinking about what you said on Saturday . . .’

‘Which thing?’ Roger’s nervous fingers were stilled for an instant.

‘You said that you’d rather be a . . . well, a fool than a crank. . . . You said it better than that of course; but that, in a word, is what you said. . . . I’ve been thinking. . . .’

‘Person, dear,’ Roger said. ‘Go away, there’s a good humanitarian. I’m in a most extraordinary bad temper this morning. If you stay, I shall kill you. I know you shrink from causing bloodshed. I’ll confute you later, when I’m whole again. But not now. Don’t want to be rude.’

Person was instantly so apologetic and retiring that Roger, having a soft heart, kicked himself when he was alone. It seemed scandalous that Person, one of the joys of his life, should be so rebuffed. Yet he was truly sick. He had not slept, for thinking about Viola. He had turned this way, and that way, and all ways; he had remonstrated with himself; he had done everything his fertile brain could suggest, and the result was simply memory. He remembered how Viola had looked in her daring gown; he could see how she had engineered a caress. And he knew that

he would want to kiss her again. That made Roger very angry ; because he did not believe in kissing young women ; he thought that was a silly game to play at any time. Yet it was in his mind, between his eyes and the paper he held, present in everything he did. There was a heat in his blood, a flush in his cheek ; he swore (a rare thing), and he did not say good-morning to Robson Joyce. That was another thing : he would have to understand about Joyce. It was very unusual and unpleasant to receive different men in different rooms : he disliked the feel of it, as though it had an air of vulgarity, at least. He had no great interest in Joyce, save as an effective traveller, but he thought he saw an irresponsible man. Why hadn't Viola told him ? He remembered that she had mentioned Joyce ; but the whole thing was stupid and unsatisfactory. He did not care for intrigue ; it seemed to him that it was easier to tell the truth than to tell a convincing lie, because you remembered the truth, and might at any time forget the lie. And he hated the thought of Viola being one who twisted and suppressed the truth.

It was funny that she had dropped Septimus—there had been nothing about helping him. Roger did not much like Septimus ; he heard yarns from the others about 'Seppy' spending a penny, and approaching a shop with a mean grief at having to part with his money. The other clerks disliked Bright, and played tricks on him, hiding his hat, or borrowing his pen, or dropping things on the floor if he attended to a caller. Roger had felt sorry for him, until he found that Bright complained to Mr. Cinch on one occasion. It was true that Bright did this under severe provocation, but all agreed that it had been unsportsmanlike. So Roger did not care for Bright. When he saw Septimus on this Monday morning, he felt a sudden wave of anger come over him, a feeling of definite dislike. He knew, in a flash, that his instinct had not betrayed him.

'Good morning,' Bright said, punctiliously. 'I was at the Amersons last night.'

‘So I heard,’ growled Roger.

‘I think you may be interested to hear that I’m engaged to Mary Amerson.’

‘Indeed,’ said Roger, turning his red face unwillingly to Septimus. ‘Then I think you’re a very fortunate man. I congratulate you. But I can’t talk to you, because I’m too busy.’

Bright withdrew, puzzled at Roger’s frankness and at his composure. Roger sat glaring in front of him, and his eyes grew unpleasant.

‘It’s unthinkable,’ he muttered. He rose, and shut the door, standing with his fingers resting on the back of his chair. ‘Engaged to Mary. I can’t believe it. Why *should* he be? I suppose he’s known them some time. But *Mary* . . . O Mary, Mary, Mary! how could you do it!’ The last was in a whisper, as though she were beside him. He felt paralysed. There was something so completely unexpected in the news, that he could not accept it. One might as soon have expected him to believe that *Edie* was engaged. Why had she done it? Had she been driven to it by the Amerson tribunal, that mated and moved and slew its minor pieces? He told himself that he would not have minded if he could feel respect for the man; but there was something about Bright. Perhaps, after all, he was a good chap. . . . Perhaps anything was better than life in the bosom of the family. But Mary! He did not believe it. It was incredible. Roger walked up and down the small strip of space in his room. Something seemed to have fallen upon him like a heavy, soft weight, bowing him down; he hardly knew how much disappointed and moved he was by Bright’s story. Yet it was so simple, so straightforward, and Bright’s reputation so little one for pretence or folly, that some creeping belief underlay all his intolerant refusals to believe it. It remained in his mind throughout the morning, gnawing under his thoughts, so that unconsciously he wondered what made him feel so unhappy.

IV

Altogether, it was a day of unrest for Roger. Mr. Cadman gave him much work to do, and heaped one especially difficult job upon him, which involved a great deal of calculation. And Roger was not used to reckoning up in this way precisely how much per copy an intricately arranged book would cost to produce. He grew nervous, with his accumulated worries and the sudden arrival of Agg. Finally, Mr. Cadman left early, throwing upon Roger the responsibility of his figures and a quotation to an American firm. The thought that the figures might be wrong made Roger check them until his head ached; and in the turmoil he made a great mistake.

He instructed the stationers to make the wrong-sized paper for an important book. He told them to make demy paper, which is $22\frac{1}{2}$ inches by $17\frac{1}{2}$ inches, whereas he should have ordered royal, which is 20 inches by 25 inches. There was nobody at hand to check the error, and the order went through to the paper-mill to make this paper several inches smaller than it should have been. Roger had taken a rough note of the size, but he had written it down carelessly, and the possibility of a mistake did not occur to him. Thus, while his calculations were exact to the thirty-second of a penny, and while his other work was all accurately done, this simple thing, which involved so much, was put in train. With his head full of Viola and Mary, Roger started one of those disastrous mistakes which seem, in retrospect, as though they must inevitably have been discovered and set right. Yet, in an office, one mistake nullifies a thousand good deeds, because if a man does a wise or a careful thing it is what is expected of him, while if he does a wrong thing he steps at once outside his duty. His duty is to make no mistakes. And Roger made this mistake, which was as if one put no sugar in a cake, or put salt by mistake into a making of jam—it involved the wreck of the finished product. And although by tasting

the jam, or the sticky embryonic cake, one might find the mistake, and although by checking advice-notes and carefully comparing a specimen sheet of the paper with some other sheet of paper, it would be possible to save a complete fiasco, Roger, like the jam-maker, never dreamed that he was not following recipe, and the fruit of his action went to the pot. That was because Roger's duties, like those of the housewife, were complex, and not simple. He worked on, doing other things, thinking about his figures.

Agg, his strange co-worker, was in and out of the room several times during the day, for the week-end had brought him two blows. His new novel, called 'Eurydice,' had been published a month; reviews had been coming steadily in, from all kinds of papers, but he had only now been roused to a pitch of great anger by a gruff, kindly notice in the 'Athenæum,' and an epigram in the 'Spectator'. The 'Athenæum' had warned him about the subordination of matter to manner, and the 'Spectator' had called him 'readable,' and said that 'Eurydice' was not comparable with 'Cranford'. Now it was bitter to Agg to be called readable. It put him on a level with a thousand writers. And to say he was not comparable with Mrs. Gaskell was, he considered, a gratuitous insult. Singly, the reviews would have provoked fierce laughter from Agg; together, they gave him a grievance against all critics. He commenced quietly enough to Roger, by asking if he had seen the reviews. Roger, who compared each novel of Agg's to a rhododendron, lacking in pure colour, and swollen to an air almost of blowsiness, thought the first criticism had a germ of truth in it, and strongly dissented from the second, in so far as the word 'readable' was concerned. 'Not by a normal being,' he would have said.

'An' these bally things,' Agg said, putting in a final 'g' in his excitement, 'People one knows will see them . . . ' His eyes goggled, and his curious face grew pink. 'One don't care a damn what they *say*; it's people seeing, and rejoicing,—that's the foul part of it.'

'Don't forget that the "Huntingdon Sentinel" said every word was a delight,' Roger objected. 'The "Athenæum" is only afraid the "Sentinel" will turn your head. . . .'

Agg checked himself. Serious remarks which did not consider his intention made him angry, but humorous remarks reminded him that he was a University man, and that Roger, after all, was a plebeian. The fact that Agg's father had been a successful tradesman, although remembered by his contemporaries at the University, did not dwell in his own mind. He made Roger think (mistakenly) that all University men must at heart be snobs. All the superiority of breeding that a public school and University education may be supposed to impart grew in Agg's case to a distrust of the bourgeois element that he found in Roger. - It is true that a well-bred man can be more offensively ill-bred than any other. Agg could be witty himself, but wit in a common man never quite answered to his undergraduate standards. And Agg would never be anything but an undergraduate at heart. Roger thought many of Agg's jokes were flimsy; Agg ignored Roger's jokes altogether, because he thought it kinder. He stared down at his companion.

'Responsible literary papers,' he said, 'oughtn't to have prejudices; they ought to criticize forces, not details. Criticism of details is suburban.'

'They want more guts,' Roger said. 'Guts is what they want.'

'Exactly what they *don't* . . . They congratulate one on being a relief from the problem novelist, and the dam' realist. . . . I sometimes wonder if you publishin' chaps read reviews. I know you don't read books.'

'Only good reviews,' Roger said. 'Quotable ones. We don't care about the others. Now I can get a quotation out of the "Athenæum". When they say, "In spite of these blemishes 'Eurydice' shows an advance on the author's previous work," I omit the first words and add an exclamation mark. "An advance on the author's previ-

ous work!" . . . That's better than the "Huntingdon Sentinel's". "His style foams on like a surge of champagne". Don't you see it? I only wish old Cadman would let me make the extracts. Other people do it; papers never grumble.'

'Not a word about one's Art,' Agg grumbled. 'I don't expect they noticed that Purfew only uses Saxon words. . . . That's *Art*, my boy. Yes, and one bit's clean pinched out of Cervantes's "Galatea".' His delight in the knowledge made him friendly again. His good nature was too great to be long absent.

'Did you tell 'em?'

'Certainly not. . . . One paper said they all talked alike. You know, what it is, that all these bally reviewers are clerks—escaped clerks, writin' for their half-crowns. One did it oneself in the old days. There's no money in it. Next time I'm damned if I don't do a realistic novel. Yes, I will! I'll tell them how many hairs you've got on your chin. Tell 'em everything. What time the people get up, what they have for breakfast. Anybody can do that.'

'If they know,' Roger supplemented. 'I 'spose that's a test of observation.'

'What they drive one to . . . is a Preface!' He looked as though he meant it.

'Don't be a *fool*!'

'One's done so many good things—oh, I know! now in that—a—that . . . that thing of mine, the . . . what was it? "The Girl and the Candle". Bits in that were paraphrased from Catullus. . . . They're Literature! These devils don't know a good thing when they see it. If you're wise, you'll never read your reviews, Dennett. I never see most of them—they bore one.'

Roger grew suddenly impatient.

'Seems to me you can't choose what you'll accept,' he said. 'The whole point of sending books out is to get expert opinions. They're often not criticism at all, because when a book's read quickly, you're bound to miss the small,

delicate things. You authors want reviews next day, public wants them next day, publishers want them next day, and there's so many of them that papers can't pay for criticism. They pay for "quotable notices". Supposing I wrote about your "Eurydice," I might take half a day over it, and write two thousand words. But a professional man's got to do it for a few shillings, tell your plot ——'

'Damn him!'

'Do it *all* in two hundred and fifty words. And the best of it is, you get pushed aside by the biggest sellers. It's simply commerce. I think you ought to be jolly thankful to get noticed at all.'

Agg might have said many things, but he did not do so. He remembered that he was a University man, and a man with a grievance. He said only:—

'You wait till you've written a book.' And then he went away.

Roger himself knew that he was only half-right; but he was trying, without experience, to speak for both sides in an eternal conflict. And he was powerfully prejudiced against Agg. He thought Agg's books were not good; and he thought Agg should be told so frankly. But by other standards than his, even by comparative standards, Agg's books were quite good; and Agg knew that he must have praise. Roger could not understand why Agg wanted to write such books, because Roger never read novels; Agg could not imagine books having very much right to exist unless they continually tickled his love of words and images. And Roger thought, rather obviously, that Agg only wanted praise, while Agg honestly wanted only appreciation of his aims. He was doing a particular thing, and nobody criticized that thing—unless it was indirectly. He wanted to restore a certain classical beauty to what he called 'creative art,' and if he chose a bad post-Renaissance manner, it was the accident of his training. His instinct for beauty was right, but his feeling for beauty was imperfect; he was literary, sophisticated, tortured in his perception, and not

merely in his manner: nobody told him that; they were too busy otherwise. It is very rare for an artist to be criticized in terms of art; most people prefer terms of morality, or what Agg called suburbia. And perhaps Agg was not an artist at all; Roger thought he was not, and Roger had heard many of Agg's theories at one time and another. And he knew that Agg had somewhere a considerable talent; he thought that if Agg could be imagined without his verbosity, settled down pure to his simple task, Agg might surprise himself.

'Oh bother!' he said, and laughed at his tameness. He was tired and dispirited, after his excitement of the previous night. His nerves seemed to be on edge. He could not shake off the thought of Mary's engagement, yet he could not understand why it should move him. He knew he was not in love with her, in the ordinary sense, for Roger was at present too superficial to have deep feelings. But the idea of her possible marriage to Bright was horrible: if she could know what Bright was like, or could understand clearly, then she must have been forced into an engagement. The idea that she saw Bright plainly as he was seemed to Roger ridiculous, although he was forced to admit that he knew nothing definite against the young man. 'That's just the point!' he cried, seeing it in a flash. 'I *don't* know anything against him. He's not worth knowing anything against! He's one of those selfish devils, who's gnawed all away with vanity! He's as self-conscious a prig as ever I expect to meet! Mary oughtn't to marry a prig . . . he'll starve her!'

That was the first time Roger had ever seen anything so clear. He understood that he had been asleep! All these little things, these talks, these parties and visits, were so much piffle; he must pull himself together, or he would slip away altogether into forgetfulness of life. Here was Mary (Oh well, said his mind, he could hardly drag himself into *that*!) and here was himself (Oh well, said his mind, he could hardly drag himself *out* of that!) and here

was everything else going to rot. What should he do? Could he save both Mary and himself? He did not know what from, but he resolved to be a flaccid fool no longer. He jumped from his chair and went along to Ted Amerson's desk in the main office.

'If you'll tell me when you're going,' he said, 'I should awfully like to come with you. I'd like to see Mary for a minute.'

He was gone again, bubbling with excitement, before he could realize how peculiar Ted thought his intention. And Ted had the great sense to prevent Bright coming by the same train as far as the junction at Camden Town. He knew that Bright would arrive at the house soon enough after his own meal. And, swore Ted, he would be eternally punished if he would share his dinner with Bright!

V

At the end of the day, Roger was quieter. He almost repented of his decision to see Mary, but he was too far gone in the matter to draw back. He and Ted bought evening papers and sat side by side. Ted started telling him suddenly about an amateur performance of 'Sweet Lavender' in which he was to take the old man's part, and Roger listened in stupefaction to an extraordinary display of amateur-actor's egotism.

'Yes, I played the Major-General in "The Pirates of Penzance" last year—very good show. I got three encores for the "modern Major-General" song, and I *ought* to have had one for the sleep-walking one.' (Roger wondered which that was.) 'Went *very* well. And this year I played in "Caste" over at Hampstead. *That* was a good show; I got ripping notices in the local papers. You know—tiptoppers. "Mr. Amerson's performance stood out as one of the humorous events of the evening." None of your "Among others we must also mention". In the "Pirates" show, I got good notices; but there was a big chap who took the Policeman—he got all the fat. Of course, the Major-

General's a *small* part compared with some of the others. But they must have a good man for it. No, what *I* want to take is Ko-ko . . . you know, "Got 'em on the list". I'd have a little hat in my pocket, so's to do Winston Churchill in the third verse. It would go.'

'I should give you the bird,' Roger said.

'Eh? Oh no you wouldn't. 'Tisn't a question of politics at all. Besides, you can always rely on a theatre audience being Conservative.'

'I believe that's a common error,' Roger said. 'A learned friend tells me so.'

'Ah, he doesn't know what he's talking about. You ought to heard me put in a gag in "Pirates". I forget what it was. It *went*!'

'I wonder what Gilbert would have said.'

'Oh, *he* wasn't there,' Teddy explained simply. Roger closed his eyes. They walked quickly up Marjorie Road, and this time there were no lanterns to guide them. Roger could not readily have found the house, so like was it to the houses along the road; but Teddy had no need to look at the numbers. He knew by instinct when he was abreast of his own gate, and jingled his keys in his pocket.

As they went into the house, Mary was coming down the stairs, and Roger caught a glimpse of her white face in the gaslight.

'Hullo, Mary,' Teddy said, 'Tom home yet?'

'Teddy,' she said. 'He brought Father home this morning!'

'Brought!'

'He's awfully ill. . . . I've just come away. Grace is there.'

'Good lord! Poor old Father!' Teddy stood helpless, and Mary saw Roger. Suddenly her cheeks flamed.

VI

Roger did not know how it was, but Ted disappeared: and he was alone with Mary.

‘I’m so sorry,’ he said. ‘What is it?’ She came nearer with her eyes averted, and her face still coloured.

‘I don’t know, Roger. . . . The doctor says a “break-down,” but I don’t know what it can mean. Tom says he’s been all right; and we haven’t noticed anything.’

‘I thought the other day. . . . It’ll be all right. Don’t you worry.’

‘Roger . . . I can’t help being afraid,’ she began, speaking very low. ‘I’ve tried to cheer Mother; she’s frightened out of her life. He’s not very young. It’s been terrible—we don’t seem able to *do* anything. Only to look on, and see him. He’s in bed now, asleep; but he . . .’ she shuddered. ‘The way he looks at us . . . as though he didn’t know us. . . . And he talks so that we can’t understand—trying to say he’ll be quite well in a minute,’ . . . she stopped, suddenly. ‘Somehow it’s a relief to tell you. . . . I always feel that you understand—that you don’t lose your head. We’ve *all* lost our heads. Mother’s terribly upset. Yet she won’t come away from him. I’ve begged her to, but she’s ——’ Loyalty forbade a further disclosure; but Roger had the vision of a chicken.

‘I don’t expect I can do anything,’ he said. ‘Can I? You’ll tell me, won’t you?’

‘No, no.’ She shook her head, and looked up in his eyes. ‘I *would* tell you if there was. Won’t you stay with Ted?’

‘I came to see you,’ he began vaguely. ‘No, I won’t stay. I heard—Bright said something to-day. . . .’ The words would not come coherently; he could only look at her in some confusion. Mary started, and seemed to fall into a curious stillness. He could see how her mouth trembled—her sensitive mouth, that had always revealed her moods; and a strange feeling came over him. His mood of activity returned suddenly, and he stood squarely before her, honestly. ‘I somehow wanted to see you. . . . You and I are very old friends, Mary; it startled me.’ He could not understand himself, yet he could not stay the words.

'I felt it wasn't real. . . . And I thought I could walk the rest of the way.'

Mary felt that she was being stifled. Her mind went back to the scenes of Saturday evening, to the previous evening, when Bright, strangely silent and all-watching, had kissed her at meeting and parting; and she put a hand to her cheek to hide its burning, and her own shame. When she spoke, it was so low as to be almost inaudible to Roger.

'Mr. Bright told you we're engaged. . . . It's true. . . . It seems. . . . It's quite true ——'

Roger's face stiffened; his eyes searched for anything in her face but unhappiness, and his heart sank at his failure. He seemed to feel that she had lost her shyness and her exquisite simplicity. A door at the end of the passage opened, and Ted appeared, still holding the further handle.

'Aren't you coming, Mary?' he called.

'And I must go,' said Roger. 'You're sure . . . sure it's all right. Excuse me; it sounds beastly.' She would not turn, though if she had looked at him she must have blurted out the truth; and he was forced to be content. 'I hope you'll be very happy, Mary. I told Bright so; but I couldn't take it in. You keep up your spirits about your father. I shall hear all the news from Ted. . . .'

His last thoughts were of her listless figure, and he was puzzled and exasperated, and something more. For the first time in his life Roger felt impotent. He was baffled by her simple acceptance of something that looked to him like wanton sacrifice. He could do nothing to help her, and although he was not a busybody, he wanted to help her. He could only stand by in a puzzled silence, wondering how it should be that simple souls might not converse together without transgressing the laws which govern social intercourse in English suburbs. By following Nature, he would have reached her heart, uttering his thoughts bluntly; yet he was forbidden to do that, by custom, and by her own

behaviour. If he did not wring his hands, at least he did not shrug his shoulders; and an anger grew slowly in his mind—against Mary.

‘Little idiot!’ he said. ‘What’s the good of doing a thing like that? ’Pon my word, I think girls are the most preposterous creatures. And why, in heaven’s name, can’t I tell her she’s idiotic?’

The cold wind surrounded him; the silent streets echoed to his footsteps. His anger grew, still against Mary, and against her family. All the time, it was secretly at his own impotence. For, with his new determination, Roger had found a belief in his own strength, and this was the first reverse, showing that he was still dreaming, a stranger in a world of strangers. He, who had thought himself free!

CHAPTER IX

ROGER MAKES AN ENEMY

I

ROGER awoke, after a dreamless night, and shook his head drowsily. The warm bed was so delightful that he lay in an ecstasy of comfort, feeling that this precious drowsiness was the happiest mood of the day. He did not think that definitely; he basked in complete inactivity, gloating over his own paralysed will. He even gibed at it.

'Ah, my hearty; you can't get me up!' he said. Before he knew what was happening he was out of bed, in his dressing-gown and slippers, and on his way to the bathroom. 'That was curious!' he exclaimed, and felt a roaring pride at the defeat of sloth. But as he thought about it he grew more surprised. In the first place, he had not *wanted* to get up. In the second place, he had *got* up. 'Perfectly simple. . . . Forces over which we've no control, struggling madly to possess the soul,' he said. He was by this time standing on the mat beside the bath and juggling with the taps. For it was bitterly cold, and Roger was a poor Spartan. He gave the hot-water tap an opportunity of declaring itself. It was but feebly warm. That was another thing. If he had stayed comfortably in bed, the water might have been warmer, or it might have been even colder, as he could not help admitting. It was a mystery. Why should he challenge himself, and then respond to his own challenge? There were always two voices, one luring him to idleness, and the other, more secret and powerful, making him do things. His idleness voice had made him ashamed of his visit to Mary; his activity voice had left

him no alternative. 'Yes, and what did you get out of it?' sneered idleness. Roger accepted the lukewarm water at this moment, and chuckled as he lashed it over his quivering body. It was as great a game as it had always been, this bathing; as a baby he had protested against the towel. And as the water brought vigour and alertness to his limbs, Roger defied the voice of idleness. 'I don't know why I did it,' he said. 'But I did it, and that's enough for you, old cock. See?' He was out of the bath again now, towelling heartily, until he was in a glow, and fit for any adventure. Only, of course, he had to find the adventure. He might say to Mary, and mean it, that the walk from Kentish Town to Highgate was an adventure; and so perhaps it was. But it gave him no employment for the heroic strain in his nature. And Roger was one of those young men who must be active; he had no idea of *killing* time. He could be lazy, but he wanted spurts of tremendous accomplishment. Publishing, he found, was unexpectedly strenuous; but it was also exhausting. He never knew when his work was done; the ten thousand things he had to bear in mind were always hovering above him, like a swarm of gnats; the close work was lowering his vitality. But he found it intensely fine and exciting: he had never understood the romance of books as he found it in his work—ignored by everybody else in the firm. He would go cheerily into the office (except on Mondays) ready for any surprise. There was never any foreknowledge of the mysterious contents of the morning post, for example. It might contain a letter from a Lord, or an order for some deceased book, long ago sold off to the booksellers who deal in those quasi-second-hand books known as 'remainders,' or it might contain a rebuke from a bookseller, or the offer of an epoch-making book, or the announcement of a projected visit from any man alive. And that was only one thing. Roger still found it exquisite to handle the typescript of a book not yet published, to glance over its pages and catch words dropping from some worldly mind. He enjoyed counting

the words on a page in order to guess at the number of words in the whole book; he enjoyed asking the printers to send a specimen page in a particular type; and all the stages of production, from proofs, the ordering of paper, the printing order, the binding order, binding designs, review copies, reviews,—even sales interested him. How different that was from old Cadman, who saw most books in terms of sale. Roger sometimes desired that Cadman should notice a cunning page of type, or some marvellous contrivance for making a technical book readable; but Cadman would look at the object, and say, 'Well, now—a—Dennett . . .' and would dash Roger by his lack of perception.

'However,' said Roger, thinking of these things as he put on his tie. 'There's certainly an awful lot to do to-day, and I wouldn't mind betting that I've done something wrong. I feel it deep in my heart. Oh, *where's* that most filthy and distressful cuff-link?'

II

'As to breakfast,' Roger said to Edie. 'Any news of it?'

'You're too early.' Edie looked portentous in her long, striped pinafore, and her pale face was solemn. Above her face, which was round and white, was a strange bundle of hair, worn as Edie always wore it in the morning—half up and half down. She would shake it when she was annoyed with Roger. She shook it now. 'I didn't call you.'

'It was a mistake,' he explained. 'My true self conquered my false self, and made me get up. It was like the battle of Apollyon. . . .' Edie sniffed, and tried to look taller than her four feet eight inches. She was very thin, but not unhealthily so, for Edie had the strength of a colt, as well as the sagacity of an octogenarian.

'I heard you in the bathroom,' she said. Roger expressed his gratification. 'It wasn't *that*,' she went on. 'I'm doing Brownie. Mother's not up yet.'

'If you're doing Brownie,' Roger submitted (the allusion was to one of Mrs. Ewing's stories, in which some little

boys, reading how the Brownies did all the work early in the morning, emulated the Brownies and earned their rewards). 'If you're doing Brownie, you oughtn't to stand palavering with me. I put it to you, Edie . . .'

'Silly little thing,' Edie said. But she took his advice, and went on with her preparations. A sumptuous fire crackled already in the grate, with some smoke. Roger cleaned his boots and put them on. Later, he found the milk on the doorstep and glanced at the morning paper, to find nothing better than the police-court news and an article on mismanagement in the British Colonies. Tiring of the paper, he casually watched the energetic Edie, who whistled at her work as though she were grooming a horse.

'Do you whistle any *tune* when you make that noise?' Roger inquired. Edie's face showed pink, but the sissling noise continued. 'I say, Edie . . . E—die . . . ' She took no notice, because she was accustomed to his teasing. 'Edith Blanche!' He tried again. 'How did you get on with the *Chanson des Saisons* ?'

That brought her round, and he had a difficulty in remaining serious, for her face had taken on some of the polish of blacklead. But it was a suddenly beaming face, and not at all solemn now, for they were great friends.

'It's lovely!' Edie said. She approached, bearing the blacklead brush, on which he kept a wary eye. 'I can play all *Spring* !'

'Noble! I seemed to think that was the longest.'

'No, Summer. Wonder why.'

'It's a French piece. They may have occasional summers there,' Roger explained. 'If it had been English, Winter would have been the longest. Summer would have been like a breath. But what are you doing with the blacklead brush, child?'

'Doing the grate,' Edie responded, half defiant.

'A *real* Brownie would have done it before lighting the fire.' He was gently reproachful.

'I don't believe he would if he had been as cold as me,'

Edie said. Somehow she was irresistible, with her black-leaded face, and Roger laughed aloud.

‘Wash your face again before breakfast. . . . And sing out for Mother, or I shall be late!’

‘D’you like Mary, Roger?’ Edith suddenly asked. ‘I like her *very* much.’

Roger eyed his sister.

‘Eh? Like her? Yes, of course.’ He had not thought about Mary except during the altercation between his selves.

‘D’you know she’s going to be married?’

‘*Is* she . . . ?’ Edie turned round again from her work. ‘And not . . . aren’t *you* going to marry her?’

‘What!’ cried Roger. ‘Here, my girl, you’d better get on with your face-blackening.’ He muttered to himself, pretending to be tremendously annoyed. ‘You’re a sentimentalist, Edie.’

‘Won’t she come again?’

Roger had not thought of that. He wondered.

‘And her father’s very ill—old Mr. Amerson.’

‘They *do* seem to have trouble in *that* family,’ Edie observed sedately.

‘Don’t they!’ Roger was as serious as a brother. ‘Of course, we don’t have any at all.’

‘Well, *do* we?’ She appealed to him.

‘My dear Edie. . . . It’s useless for you to look sagacious with a black face. Remove your warpaint, and I’ll discuss the matter with you.’ She was absent for a minute, and returned with the smudge removed. ‘Now, they’re a larger family than we are. See? And they don’t live as we do. . . . And a more poor miserable lot of creatures I’ve never pitied!’

‘But why don’t they stop it?’ Edie brought her brain to bear on the problem. ‘Can’t they?’

Roger had one of his flashes of inspiration at this point.

‘I don’t know whether they could,’ he said. ‘But I know they’d be very angry if you suggested that anything

was wrong. You'd better not mention this talk to Mary, if you see her.'

Eddie thought for a moment.

'Of course, *we're* all right,' she said.

'Naturally . . . Everybody is, . . .' Roger chuckled. 'I'm sorry that I can't discuss the family as an institution with you for a few years, Eddie. I'm sure you'd be helpful.'

'Is anything the matter with us?' Eddie asked, humbly, more humbly than was her habit.

'The thing that is the matter with us,' Roger explained (partly to himself) 'is that we are simply maintaining what's known as the *status quo ante* . . . and that's a thing I can't explain to you.'

'Why not?' pressed Eddie. 'I want to know.'

'Listen: there's Mother!'

'I shall ask her. . . . Mother, good morning, dear . . . Roger says we're wrong because we only maintain the—something . . .'

Mrs. Dennett came into the room as she always did, with something like impetuousness. It was a habit retained from her young days, and she looked ready to do impossible things for her children.

'Maintain the *what*, Roger?' she demanded.

'The two-power standard, Mother. You see, Eddie's turned to serious things early. We've been talking Sociology together.' Roger winked at his mother, who, mystified, smiled back, and took matters in hand with a gay activity which would have charmed an observer. It charmed Roger, indeed, but he was pulling Eddie's hair very slightly, and so he could not find leisure to record his observation consciously. It went to form that great store of delightful memories which he was building up for unwilling grandchildren.

III

'I feel a little like a town-crier, Mother; but I feel bound to repeat my two items of news. The first is, that

old Mr. Amerson is very ill, and the second is that Mary is engaged to a young man named Bright.' Roger paused. 'The brother of Viola Bright.' He spoke very lightly, but this time there was a slight strain, as of some forced lightness in his voice. He felt as irritable as a girl who does not know why she is blushing.

Mrs. Dennett stopped suddenly in her work.

'Is he a nice young man?' she asked. Roger felt shabby and on the defensive, so he had to struggle against his inclination to prevaricate. The truth was, they understood each other so well that Roger felt his mother's disappointment, and Mrs. Dennett was acutely conscious of Roger's displeasure with her for being disappointed.

'Not within a thousand miles of Mary,' he said, not looking at her. 'I think he's honest.'

'That's not everything,' prompted Mrs. Dennett.

'True,' he laughed. 'I'm trying to be exact.' Yet he was very uncomfortable.

'But, Roger . . . It's such a serious thing for a girl.'

'Mother, I think it's frightful. He's absolutely the wrong sort of young man,' cried Roger, and he felt a satisfaction at being irritated with Mrs. Dennett for persisting in the obvious. 'She'll be as miserable as possible. But nobody can do anything now. I'm out of patience with Mary; it isn't as though she were *forced* into anything. They're not cruel—only stupid. *She's* done it. As Edie would say, she's "made her bed" . . .'

'I *never* said it!' cried Edie.

'Little pitchers should be seen ——' Roger began. 'Well, child, get on with the breakfast. I'm not talking to you.'

'I'm so amused at you!' Edie cried. 'I'm so amused at you.' She stared at him impudently.

'She hasn't any friends,' Mrs. Dennett said. 'I can't help blaming you, Roger.' It was out, explicit and full. Mrs. Dennett rarely blamed anybody. Roger looked indignant, because he hated any sort of interference; but it

rankled in his mind. He became stubborn with unwilling contrition.

'If you *knew* what goes on,' he said, abruptly. 'You'd see that things outside aren't as they are here. You've been too long away from affairs. People don't bother about such things. I only bother about Mary because she's a nice kid. But when she does a thing like this ——'

'You let her go?' Mrs. Dennett was perfectly serious. 'I don't like that, Roger. When you like her so much.'

'Mother, the idea of personal responsibility for other people's lives is parochial. In London, we're all preserving ourselves. Mary does something I don't like—it's Mary's business, mind! I should *like* to say to her that Bright will sap all her spirit, and leave her like an empty orange. Well, I can't say it. If I said it I should be grossly impertinent, possibly untrue—and I should lose Mary's friendship. One lets things slide. You can't do it—as you'd realize, if you didn't sit here making day-dreams.' Roger grew impatient, and his colour deepened. 'It's a sickly business.'

And still Mrs. Dennett was not convinced. She had more courage and good-feeling than Roger, and she was not sulky, as he was. She looked at him with her wise, innocent, motherly expression, and his anger vanished. He shook his head, to show that they had spoken long enough about this, and that Edith was listening.

'I shall tell Mary myself,' Edie announced. 'So there, Master Roger.'

'You'll lose Mary's friendship in any case,' said Mrs. Dennett. 'You might just as well do it honourably. Don't you think so?' Of course she was extraordinarily unpractised, and she could speak only from her own nature, like a child.

'He's not a cad . . . only a hollow prig,' Roger answered. 'If he was a liar, or a rogue, the thing would be different. You're so unpractical, Mother, as if the whole world was a big family. . . . As though everybody wanted

to work in a universal harmony. It's a preposterous notion.'

'I feel as though it was a very *small* family,' Mrs. Dennett said. 'But very miserable. And I think you're letting it go on being miserable, Roddie. It's only a sort of vulgar pride, you know.'

Roger jumped up, and frowned; but she could only look at his good-natured face, and smile.

'Pride!' he ejaculated. 'When you sit in your little cloister. You know, if I hadn't got up too early I should have escaped all this. And now it's getting late. Your little world—little family!'

'Squabbling, and too proud to make it up, and sensitive,' Mrs. Dennett said.

'One thing worse than a sentimentalist is a suburban moralist!' stormed Roger. 'And one thing worse than that,' he went on, catching sight of Edie, 'is a little tadpole not getting her brother's breakfast.'

'Mother!' Edie wailed. 'He called me a tadpole!'

'It's a symbol,' he explained. 'Every tadpole carries a frog's bâton in his knapsack. Come on, Edie, I'm famishing. It's a case of you and me against the moralizing older generation.'

'I'm on Mamma's side!' He was bereft of all support. Woman, as represented by the superior half of the Dennett household, was arrayed against him.

'I shall ask Mary to tea,' Mrs. Dennett said, defiantly. It was her notion of life.

IV

Mr. and Mrs. Dennett had been friends as children, in a town remote from London; and they had not been sweethearts in adolescence because Charles Dennett had been away at school, and, later, at Cambridge. His later education had been secured by a scholarship, for neither of the Dennetts sprang from anything more remarkable than a family of small traders. Old Mr. Dennett, in fact, had been

a fishmonger, so that his son could never eat fish ; while old Mr. Surface had been a linen-draper. Thus, both Charles Dennett and his wife were exceeding proud, but they were democrats. Their pride arose from their inferior birth, while their democratic opinions were due to the intense bigotry of their parents. When they married, the Dennetts resolved that their children should not suffer, as they had suffered, from the old tyranny of snubbing and suppression which had made them rebellious ; they believed that there was a mean course between extinction of impulse and the frightful pre-maturity which attends the undue prominence given to children in some families. They said in effect : our children ought not to be prigs or the products of discipline ; and Roger and Edith had accordingly been allowed liberty which had brought Mrs. Dennett a strange reputation among surrounding mothers. But the children had not been nurtured in a rough and ready scheme ; their liberty had been an understood trust, and they responded by being unusually honourable and unaffected. Thus, Roger had not grumbled when he left school to earn his living, although he had looked forward to a better preparation ; and he had taken his rebuffs lightly, and his success without self-satisfaction. He had been, for a time, a clerk in the office of a steamship company ; and the work there had interested him very little indeed. Then, for several years, he had been with some wholesale stationers, and he had for the first time turned his thoughts to the publishing trade. Publishing, Roger thought, must be a remarkably fascinating business. The thought grew upon him ; he read advertisements in the 'Athenæum,' and found a situation as a shorthand-typist with a man who promised to make publishing a live affair. Roger thus obtained some insight into the way in which a publishing business was started ; but unfortunately his employer was not able to keep the business afloat for more than fifteen months ; and it was at his failure that Roger discovered Tremlett & Grove. He had now been with Mr. Cadman

for about four months, and he was growing each day more accustomed to the firm's ways, which he found to be quite different from those of his former employer. He found that Mr. Cadman regarded the publishing trade as moribund, a superstition much patronized by the firms of yesterday.

Edie Dennett, whose life was not yet very far advanced, had a liberty not unlike Roger's. She was growing up steadily, without restrictions, in a similar atmosphere, so that she was, at this time, without inflated ideas and without the hunger for sympathy which produces inflated ideas. So she was now a natural little girl, as brave as a lion, and very interfering; but she loved her brother nearly as much as she loved her father and mother: and would have sacrificed anything to serve him.

Roger sometimes thought of his mother as sitting at home with Edie and his father, in the heart of a great deep wisdom. Yet his mother seemed to be completely ignorant of mundane things. She was like the writers of tracts, who seem to have no sense of probability, or *vraisemblance*; but, unlike the writers of tracts, Mrs. Dennett had some sort of spiritual vision. She understood more than she knew, and in that was typically feminine, since most men know more than they understand. She knew almost nothing at all, it appeared, but she had more sympathy to give than most mothers, and more sense of humour than many. It was, secretly, Mrs. Dennett who was the pivot of the family, but they all felt it with a delicious vagueness, and they all thought that home was the most delightful place on earth. Even Roger, for all his wanderings, was much more than a guest. The Dennetts had humour, resource, and temper. They lived independently of each other, but they had no secrets, because it is unnecessary to have secrets where confidences are not exacted; and they were happier than they had ever been, because each day brought them more into consciousness of personal intimacies that are often lacking elsewhere. But they were not remark-

able; no Dennett of either generation would make the world ring: they belonged to that type of family which is not known to exist, because of its extreme capacity for self-effacement. They interested neither the sociologist nor the reformer.

V

When Roger left the house that morning he was seriously disturbed. It was, of course, absurd of his mother to think that he had any responsibility for Mary's ill-doings; but he knew that Mrs. Dennett's blame was not based on anything so preposterous. She had taken a mother's glimpse into the future, and without vulgarity had seen that the peculiarly frank terms upon which Roger and Mary were might indicate that fundamental sympathy which she found in the souls of all good people. She had seen that Mary might produce the best that was in Roger; she knew that Roger's courage was essential to Mary. So might Roger have seen it, if the Brights had not intervened. The Brights, in short, were unwelcome trespassers, in Mrs. Dennett's mind. She saw them obtruding, and spoiling a fair scene, like trippers in a landscape. They were unnecessary. Roger could appreciate all of that except the relations of Mary and himself. He liked Mary; but he was engrossed by Viola. Mary pleased him by her simplicity and her *naïveté*, and he was sorry to see her lost in the crowd of Amersons, but he was not interested enough to be more than vaguely hurt by her sudden turn to Bright. On the other hand, his whole person seemed occupied with Viola. Since their parting, she had presided over his day's work. He had for ever seen her standing before him in a striped gown that revealed her pretty figure; he had felt her hands upon his shoulders; he had laughed, fascinated, over her quick mind. The things she had said—vulgar, and sincere alike—recurred to him; and he was seized with triumph. He wanted to be with her, to be thrilled by her strangeness. If he compared her with

Mary, he could see that Viola would not bear the test; he found Mary baffling in her simplicity, and Viola alluring in her power to excite him. And Mary paled, like some fair-haired damsel in the 'Morte Darthur'. Immediately, Viola sprang up, supple, pliant and permanent as wild convolvulus, with clinging arms. She was not, and could not have been, anything so melodramatic as a Siren; but he could never forget her. Again and again he realized her agitation, the intensity of her desire for him; and it was all too new and welcome to be absurd.

So Roger walked down Highgate Hill, past St. Joseph's Retreat, and down past the historic Whittington stone, which also marks a public-house; and he was perplexed. If he could grasp the difficulty, he was quick to act; but he did not think the difficulties of human relationships could be grasped. He refused intolerantly to think of Mary as being somebody in need of friendship, although he knew that was true. He said, 'I can't help it . . . I can't help it. I've got other things to do. I've got my work to do. Women seem to think that men are as free as they are. They're not. They're tied. Yes, they're tied. What *could* I do? I can't go and say to Mary that she's made a mistake. It's ridiculous. I should be ridiculous. Things like that aren't *done*. Why, good Lord! Anybody would think ——'

He reached the office in the same state of argument. Even when he had tried to read his paper, words came into his head and prevented him from understanding what he read. They made him feel hot. He addressed himself; 'Shut up . . . don't nag!' But the words still came stealthily across his mind. It struck him to wonder whether his good angel was dyspeptic this morning, for certainly the bad angel was sulky, putting in dull expostulations every now and then. 'Ridden! That's what I am!' Roger muttered to himself. 'It seems that I've got no will at all, now.' He wondered where he had read that voices in the head were signs of madness—that kind of madness which is so mercilessly described by the poor as 'bats in the

belfry'—and it gave him a strange comfort. If he went mad, his troubles would be over; the constant battle would be finished, and he transported to a land of silence, where all was grey and unknown, sleeping and waking, dreaming only of adventures in pleasant places. . . . 'Squey-er!' cried the train-conductor. Roger started mechanically to his feet. It was Leicester Square station and he must put aside his home thoughts, in order to submit to the yoke of Tremlett and Grove. There was a grin on his face as he came out of the station into Coventry Street. Nobody ever thought Roger vacillating; he was always spoken of as clear-headed. Nobody knew his thoughts, or his swift, unreasoning angers; so here, nobody imagined that Roger was walking along bewildered by the idle chance of a girl's unexpected engagement. Nobody would have believed that he had no definite attitude in the matter. Like most young men, Roger never revealed his secret thoughts; he had no idea that he was an enigma to all who beheld his unfailing cheerfulness. He was always expecting to be found out.

VI

'Oh, Dennett,' said Cadman, when Roger went into the room. 'Stop a minute!' The walrus was sitting back in his chair staring at a portrait of George Washington, while Cinch stood near, looking worried out of his life. Roger stopped and stood with one hand resting lightly on his employer's desk. 'What do you think, Cinch?' Cadman asked.

'Certainly,' said Cinch. 'I should like to know what Dennett thinks.' He was very sedate, and his mildness was tinged with a peculiar irony, because he did not care at all what Dennett thought.

'Well—a—Dennett. Person's given notice.'

'Good Lord!' breathed Roger. Why had old Person done that? He remembered that Person had tried to speak to him on the previous day; and in a flash he fathomed the indirect Person's manner of approach.

'Yes. . . . He's going to manage an estate,' sneered

Cadman. They smiled perfunctorily. 'But one of the juniors will have to do his work. It rests between—a— young what's his name . . .' ('Amerson,' breathed Cinch.) 'and Bright. Now—a . . . Amerson's a good lad, and Bright's . . . I suppose he's competent. We don't know which of them ——'

'Bright's the sound man, without a doubt,' Cinch said, giving Roger a lead.

'Gives me the creeps,' interrupted Cadman. 'But it doesn't affect me. . . .'

Roger thought: 'Why do they ask me?' He knew that Cadman intended a subtle compliment. His eye wandered for an instant.

'It means more money, I suppose,' he hazarded.

'Certainly.'

'I don't know anything about their work.'

'Cinch tells me they're both about the same—eh, Cinch?'

It was a trying moment for Roger; he had nothing to gain by his advice, and something to lose. In a strange quick memory he recalled Viola's intercession. Deliberately, he played straight.

'Well—this is a thing,' he said, slowly. 'I . . . I heard last night that Amerson's father was . . . had suddenly been taken ill. I think he'll be—it seems as though it might be permanent. I know the money would be a great help, because naturally —— Isn't there something in the time they've been here?'

'Ill, you say? I mean, the father,' Cadman cried. 'What's the matter with him?'

'Some sort of seizure or failure. . . . Amerson could tell you. . . . I know nothing about either of them. That's my only reason.' Roger looked at Cinch's frowning face.

'Let's have Amerson in, Cinch. . . . All right, Dennett,' said the Walrus. Roger departed.

'By gum!' he was saying to himself, 'I've done something now!' He did not know how true that ejaculation

was. He had definitely done something, and the jealousies of an office are not lightly appeased.

VII

Septimus Bright watched Ted Amerson go into Mr. Cadman's room, and he stood thinking, with the back of one hand pressed to his mouth. He knew all the moves of the game, for Person had told the others. The others were sitting about at their work—Jerdow had sauntered back to his desk at the call for Ted Amerson—and there was quiet in the office. Person, with his eyes hidden behind glasses, went stolidly on with his work. Bright looked up for a minute at the stacks of old books—ledgers and daybooks, and the old invoice-books which were used for the Town trade; he had known that Cinch and Cadman were discussing the position. It was his place by right—he was, he felt, a better man than Amerson. He did not like Ted. Of them all he liked only Tom and Mary—Tom for his common sense, Mary because when he thought of her all his muscles seemed to contract with the intensity of his love for her. Ted Amerson seemed to him a butterfly, a fellow who did not want to do more than let all slide. Round and round in Bright's mind went the thought: 'First Dennett, then Amerson. . . . What's doing? First Dennett. . . . What does that mean? Dennett . . .' As he narrowed his eyes he could imagine Dennett standing with the others—perhaps saying, 'Oh, give it to Amerson'. He could feel it so clearly that he could see even the pictures that hung in Mr. Cadman's room. He could see the portrait of Washington, and the two or three original drawings from a book on the Argentine Republic which had been framed and hung round the walls. He could feel the carpet soft under his feet . . . and see Dennett standing there, grinning, with that confident look on his face, facing Cadman, and saying, 'Oh, give it to Amerson'. He wouldn't say, 'I was at school with Amerson'. No, he wouldn't *say* that; but he'd think it. That was the sort of thing you had to fight against if you

wanted to . . . get on. He hadn't forgotten that Dennett sat next to Mary at supper. . . . He hadn't asked her about that; whenever his mind came round to that he was afraid to ask her. He wasn't *sure* of Mary. . . . He wasn't sure of anything. He could never be sure of anything—sure that people were not doing something continually behind his back. It made him suspicious that people tried to do him ill-turns; he thought Person might have said something against him. Person might have said—they wouldn't take notice of what Person said; nobody cared a straw for Person's opinion. But Dennett was different. Cadman believed in Dennett. He clenched his fists at the thought of Roger's power, and his own impotence. He heard the others sniggering, and turned sharply. Jerdow was standing with his jaw dropped, to imitate Bright's naturally long face, and with his shoulders hunched in imitation of Napoleon's moody attitude. A cold fire came into Bright's eyes.

'Thanks so much for the exhibition,' he said, bitterly. He had not the humour to take the thing as a joke, and he was too self-engrossed to suppress his annoyance. Jerdow, an impudent young man, with a face like putty roughly moulded, and flying spiky hair, strode up and down, reciting:—

' . . . Stars, hide your fires ;
Let not light see my black and deep desires ;
The eye wink at the hand ——'

'My *God!*' Bright leapt across the office, his face white with anger, his arm raised in the air. Jerdow stopped, and drew himself up; the others sniggered, and half slipped off their stools. In the trade department, which was separated from the counting-house by a wooden partition, a collector was calling over titles of books which he wanted: 'one 'andy manual of Chemistry. . . . For Love and Lord, sixpence. Not done? One Hagg's Girl and the Candle. . . . Elpine Climbin', three-and-six, new edition. . . . Not yours, sir? Theck-yer.' In spite of this interruption, Bright stood with his face near to Jerdow's, staring at him, his teeth bare. Jerdow grew rather red, but his fists were clenched, and he had a good pluck.

'Yes,' Jerdow said, with a breathless assumption of drawling, 'one behind the eye-tooth wants stopping. . . .'

Bright turned away, trembling. He could not strike: one impudent speech about his personal appearance made his hostility disappear, though his anger remained.

'Little fool . . . manners of a hooligan!' he muttered.

'“Dost thou so hunger for mine empty chair,”' cried Jerdow, '“that thou wilt needs invest thee with mine honours before the hour be ripe?”'

Bright sat silently at his desk; the words passed over him. The frightful sureness with which Jerdow had read his soliloquy showed him many things; but it pressed deep and piercingly into his mind the knowledge that he was unpopular. For there was no joking ring in Jerdow's voice; it was clear and sneering. And Bright felt that when the others laughed it showed they were against him. They disliked him; he was an alien—he could not understand why it should be, but he answered their coolness with a bitter coolness of his own. 'Very well,' he thought to himself. 'We shall see.'

Ted Amerson came out of Mr. Cadman's room with his face flushed and beaming. Bright saw him before the others. His mouth closed firmly; his eyes became nothing—they were simply the spy-holes from which he surveyed the chances of battle. With one tense dash of realization—like a sudden tearing of calico—Bright knew that Ted had been given Person's work. His long hands came forward upon the desk, white and supple, and he looked away from Ted deliberately. 'I thought as much,' he thought. 'Exactly as I thought . . . Dennett . . . Dennett. Very well.' Behind him Jerdow was whistling 'See the Conquering ——' and the others were laughing. 'So Dennett backed Amerson. It's easy to see why he's done that.' He remembered the complete trust in Mary's expression when she spoke to Roger, and her confusion when she was with himself. 'I can see why he's done it,' Bright said. 'I'm not blind.'

CHAPTER X

VARIOUS AMOURS

I

IT seemed to Mary that she had never before seen so clearly the complete selfishness of Grace and her mother, for after Mr. Amerson's seizure Grace had kept aloof, and Mrs. Amerson had rambled on incessantly about her own feelings. Grace had seen only that her wedding must be brought forward, and that the celebration would have to be curtailed in view of the invalid. The latter was her chief annoyance, the manœuvring of Gower her chief concern. They had begun in a desultory way to buy furniture; but Grace ran now to suites. Suites of everything seemed to be essential. She wanted everything solid, so that it would look well even when they moved into a larger house. Grace was practical to the heart. She did not look on marriage as an adventure, or as a solemn undertaking; she regarded it as an opportunity. It was clear to her that only a home of one's own held any real satisfaction. The Marjorie Road house was a caravanserai, and she wanted her own furniture, and linen. She would be free from her everlasting mother. She and Gower had often laughed at her mother. Gower imitated her to their mutual pleasure. She had been cramped; she wanted to manage things in her own way; she wanted to keep house according to her own idea. Everything had always been muddled at home; she would not muddle in future. It all lay clear before her, with Gower close at hand. She loved Gower as he loved her; they sat hand in hand, or arm in arm; and Gower smoked. In the train, when they were together, he

read his paper. Sometimes his embrace was too rough, but she faced him down in those cases, because she was determined to allow no liberties. She knew exactly what passed in his mind, and could safeguard herself always against his muscular ardour. Their eyes would meet, and Gower would laugh boisterously, and clap her on the back, because he knew they understood one another. There was the same dull hardness behind the eyes of each of them, and each had resolved on ultimate victory. Superficially, it would lie with Gower, because he was the male; but Grace held the winning hand, and she knew exactly how far Gower should be allowed to go. Their affection was solid, family-rearing, home-building love of man for woman. Grace was intensely 'proper,' but wisely so; instinctively she acknowledged the view of that Turkish writer who said 'it is wrong for women to think and to know much, for they kill nature with their thoughts.' All the same, she was the only Amerson girl or woman who understood men; and her selection of Gower, which appeared to some a happy chance, was one of those excellent contrivances by which family traditions are perpetuated.

Mrs. Amerson fussed round her husband with a sort of nervous triumph. She had been unable to exert herself all her life, but he lay now captive at her feet. His eyes shed a dumb creature's agony at her approach and gloating over his helplessness, and only Mary understood it. She knew he felt as she did when Septimus Bright was near her. Vainly she appealed to her mother, who sat talking in her streaming voice beside the bed, telling Mr. Amerson how she had foreseen a breakdown as the result of his hard work, how she had begged him to take things more easily, what Aunt Minnie had said to her, what she had said to Aunt Minnie. It was of no use for Mary to protest; the monologue continued. Sometimes Mrs. Amerson would put questions to her husband, not bullily, but with a pathetic futility that shook Mary to her heart's depths. Mr. Amerson only stared, and mumbled unintelligible

words, looking at Mary with the dog-like appeal of silence until she succeeded at last in removing her mother. Then he would sink into a doze. Once or twice he brought Mary to his side, and whispered 'sing,' and she would sing all the songs she knew, with her heart breaking at his helplessness. Or she would sit dreaming by his side, afraid of the frightful blunder she had made into an engagement that gave her no peace. It seemed a judgment upon her wickedness that she should have added only a link to the chain of her servitude. If she should *free* herself—she *could* not! Nobody wanted her but Septimus; and his silence and tallness seemed to dismay her into acquiescence. Other moods she had, which grew more frequent, when she clung to Septimus as the one strong serious thing she knew. He was firm, he would be kind. She *did* love him, only she was too worried to let herself go! If he would only trust her! Behind everything he said there seemed to be distrust of her; he sometimes put sudden questions, or would begin, 'But I thought you said . . .' And, every time, she humbled herself desperately, until she surprised herself with the strange passion of their kisses. It was all unreal, when she remembered it as she sat in her bedroom; and she sometimes shuddered at the thought of her unhappiness, that was deepened now until it seemed to gnaw at her heart. She never thought of Roger Dennett; she did not dare to think of him; it was as though she had taken the veil. Her life, from being miserable in a trivial, thoughtless way, had become susceptible to a slow poison of self-contempt, almost of complete recklessness. She found herself saying things to Septimus—untrue things, and vulgar, she thought—which brought a slow flush to his cheeks. She allowed herself, in her unhappiness, to pretend that she loved him without reserve. And afterwards, thinking of their talk, she blushed until her cheeks seemed scorched with fire, and until her heart beat fiercely in her throat. Nobody guessed that she lay awake night after night with dry sobs shaking her body, until she fell

asleep exhausted. They were all so preoccupied that her whiteness attracted no notice; Tom was late at the office every night; Ted was more often than not at rehearsal; Grace was filled with shopping; her mother had no thought but for her own satisfactory grief; and nobody knew how Mabel was occupied at all.

II

Nobody knew how Mabel was occupied, yet she was full of her own tremendous business. What was, to the other members of the family, at least an annoyance, was to Mabel a timely intervention. It left her to herself. She had not Mary—always *spying*, she said—and Grace was too self-occupied to heed her or to ignore her elaborately. The boys were nowhere to be seen, and Gran'ma and mother were busy in or near the sickroom, having found a congenial topic in the excellence of Jerrard Amerson and his wilful disregard of the laws of health. So Mabel was, as she told Bert Moggerson, 'on her own'. They had a delightful time together . . . chatting. Mabel had been a little bored and alone when the knock came, and when she saw who had knocked, she was flatteringly delighted.

'I'm all on my own,' she told him. 'Poor little me.'

Moggerson seated himself near the fire, and pulled up his trousers so that the pattern of his socks gleamed in the firelight. He could see Mabel sitting near him with her face every now and then uncontrollably smiling, and he settled himself in great comfort, appraising her by the flitting gleams of firelight.

'That's bad,' he remarked, jocularly. 'Mean to say, your being lonely.'

'Oh . . . but I'm not lonely *now* . . .' Mabel flushed faintly, and looked away. 'Teddy's gone to rehearsal. He's been both nights this week. It *is* awful—about Father.'

'Yerce,' Moggerson said. 'I'm sorry to hear of that. But . . . this rehearsing . . . Takes up a lot of his time,

doesn't it? Any . . . a . . . any *attraction*?' They both laughed deliciously.

'That's what you *always* think . . . you men,' Mabel pouted. Moggerson was still subject to the flattery of the word 'men' and to the feminine generality. He liked to hear a girl say 'men' were something; somehow it tickled his ears. Also, it prompted the retort courteous, which he found a great aid to conversation.

'*What* do we think?' he pressed. Mabel, in a fix, moved her hands.

'What you said . . .' It was the merest murmur.

Moggerson laughed, and leaned forward in the fireglow.

'I never *said* anything,' he pointed out. 'Now, did I? You seem to understand, though . . . eh?' He slapped his knee, and went back in his chair. 'Well, all I say is, girls *will* be girls. And . . . a . . . can't blame the fellows, can you?'

It was exquisite. Mabel was thrilling with pleasure at such delightful, perilous talk. She looked at him with soft, arch eyes, half in rebuke, half in encouragement.

'Like the way you talk!' she exclaimed. 'Anybody'd think ——'

'Thinking again! Oh, yes, well, I don't blame Ted, mind! That Miss . . . What's name . . . Fraser, Freezer . . . She's a fine girl . . . I . . . a . . . I was *very* struck . . .'

Even though he teased, Mabel's heart froze, and her lips trembled. Her wicker chair creaked with the jerk that shook her body. Moggerson kept a sharp eye on her.

'Interesting,' Mabel said, breathlessly. She felt that she wished he had not come—yet not perhaps quite that, for there was a sweetness in being thus tormented. Agony might come later, but the need for present composure was greater than all others: she was steadied by it: men were all brutes when they played at love, but they must never know how they hurt. Such was her instinct, not her reflection.

'Yes, that's the sort of girl I like . . .' he persisted, like an otter hunter at his sport. 'Fine goey sort . . .'

'Where'd you meet her?' Mabel demanded, almost fiercely.

'Out with 'Ted.' Her eyes opened . . . Ted? Never said a *word* about it.

'I could shake him!' she announced.

'Lucky fellow! I mean to say . . . She's not a common sort of girl. Ought to see the way she dresses. . . .'

He noticed that sort of thing. Instinctively she touched one of her hanging attachments.

'How?' she snapped.

'Oh, very stylish. Tell she's a . . . What I mean, she's a great swell. Gole chain, and so on. Muff and furs—cost five guineas, I bet.'

'Clothes aren't everything. I don't believe she's nice.' Mabel's heart beat and her colour rose, but at that beautiful adjective her lips pursed together in comfort. If one could throw a doubt on to the niceness of a girl, it was as if one became nicer oneself. 'I believe she's fast. They all are—these stylish ones. Actresses!' The words jerked viciously out, and her shoulders moved. Moggerson lay back and gave forth sounds of great laughter, not quite genuine.

'Why, you've never set eyes on her,' he cried, and laughed the more. 'You *are* a funny little thing!'

'Funny yourself,' retorted Mabel, crimson and savage. 'Call *me* a funny . . .'

Moggerson came forward in his chair, and brought his perky white face on a level with hers.

'Not cross, are you?' he asked. There was no answer. Mabel was trembling, and her head was turned away. 'Mabel!' He was over beside her in a instant, and as she rose in a flurry to escape, he caught her, and twisted her round to face him. For a second they struggled, and then Mabel felt suddenly limp and happy in his arms. She saw through her eyelashes Moggerson's bright confident

eyes, and was full of the joy of surrender and triumph. She was in his arms, he was kissing her, their quarrel was forgotten. All was forgotten in her blur of happiness. They stood, thus embraced in the firelight glow.

III

In the bedroom upstairs, Mary sat with her father. In the room at the back of the house on the first floor Gran'ma and Mrs. Amerson talked together. Mary's mind was going endlessly over her sins of weakness, and her father dozed. Here too the fire was warm, but the room was so dark away from the hooded lamp that the walls were lost in shadow. Everything was silent but for Jerrard Amerson's deep breathing; and Mary stared at the fire, ignoring the book which lay open on her knee. She thought to herself, nobody else was to blame. If she was unhappy, she had only to tell Septimus Bright to go, and he would not come again. She would go on with her work, and Father would get better, and Grace would be married. It wasn't really so hard; other girls had far worse troubles, and fought them. If she was weak, then she deserved to be unhappy. And she was making herself cry over things that a real girl would check at once. She wondered if that were true, if Mabel, say, was really having these silent horrible thoughts even when she seemed so easily to tell lightly all that was in her mind. The understanding that Mabel was unknown to her gave Mary only a slight shock. She knew that in their family there had never been any intimacy—that was the thing that had drawn her to the Dennetts, who seemed enwrapped in some indescribable belief in the sympathy of their aims. They seemed as though they were all going the same way. She tried to discover what was wrong, but she could not think, because she felt too much. She could only think that nobody cared what became of her. 'I'm morbid,' she said, because that was the word that was always used against her when she uttered her scruples. She had

always been told she was morbid whenever she worried about doing right. For the Amersons had the morals of buccaneers when a scruple endangered their own comfort. Anybody who indulged in standards of conduct was—not priggish, as other people might have said, but morbid. Thoughts were unhealthy. So Mary was always afraid to think. She had only lately begun to think, and the results so far had done nothing beyond confirming the Amerson view. 'I'm morbid,' Mary said. She could so distinctly see Mrs. Dennett and Edie. Edie's wriggle on the piano-stool, Mrs. Dennett's slow, kind smile, Mr. Dennett's strange, helpless humour. . . . She could not see Roger. Something slipped away, and she could not see him. Her cheeks grew hot. . . . He had come to speak to her on Monday evening—why had he come? He couldn't believe Septimus; she had told him that he must do so. Unconsciously she stretched her hand a little way, and then drew it back. The sudden sinking of the fire brought her back to the room, and to her duties. She ought not to think like this; the fire might go out, or Father wake, while she was dreaming. . . . Septimus was not coming this evening, but to-morrow; and she was going to the Brights on Sunday to tea. She mustn't forget. It was the first time she had been there . . . she would see Viola Bright. She didn't like Viola very much. Oh, but what did that matter! Septimus would be there, and he was strong, and reliable. . . . Her mind could not grasp the fact that she was afraid of him.

IV

So, for two or three minutes did Mabel and Moggerson stand, and then she felt his arms relax. For an instant she pressed closer, and found that he tried to push her from him very gently. It struck a chill to her heart, as though her happiness had still an undercurrent of fear. She saw his eyes averted, and tried in one desperate impulse to keep him; but gradually they fell apart, not looking at each other.

'Feelin' all right again now?' he asked, awkwardly.

Mabel could say nothing. She stood there with her cheeks flushed and her eyes bright, waiting. She felt that her hands trembled, and tried to keep them from sight, but she did not dare to look at him in case he should see the tears in her eyes. Moggerson did not say anything for a moment, but he made one or two nervous sniggering sounds. His eyes watched her face again, but obliquely, so that he might turn them aside again in a flash. He had been carried from philandering by some emotion, and he was trying to climb back to safety, like a man on a greasy clay bank.

‘Erum . . .’ He snapped his fingers, and would have turned away but that some unexpected shame held him rooted before her. ‘Yerce . . . a . . . Yes, I thought you were a . . . See, what’s to-day?’

Still Mabel said nothing. From her eyes stole two great tears. Moggerson was not proof against them. He came closer, and put his arms round her again. Mabel did not struggle at all this time, but clung to his coat and commenced to cry, grizzling. He could not hear what she said, but presently the words stopped altogether, and only the aftermath of sobs shook the body he held. A swelling of triumph was in Moggerson’s heart; his lips parted in the strange expression of a victor. Mabel could not disguise any longer her absolute dependence upon his will. He pressed his face against her hair, as sweet as the hay it resembled. But he said nothing.

They neither of them spoke, until they heard somebody coming downstairs; and then it was Mabel who drew away, while Moggerson sighed with relief. The steps went past the door, down the stairs to the kitchen. Moggerson saw a radiant smile on Mabel’s face, and watched her shyness with his sharp eyes until she glanced at him and made the slightest movement.

‘They’ll come back,’ he whispered.

‘I don’t care,’ Mabel said, with a faint suggestion of pouting.

‘Oh, well . . . a . . .’ he turned away, looking at his

watch. 'By jove . . . ten parce nine. I say, Mabel—fearfully sorry. I must get on. A . . . can I come to-morrow? What I mean . . . you be alone?'

She had clouded again, puzzled; but he took her hand, and pinched her fingers.

'Really?' she asked, lingeringly. 'Must you go?'

'It's a promise. . . . *Can't* break me word, can I?'

She went with him to the front door, and there was a further smothered hurried kiss. She whispered, 'To-morrow,' and watched him go, with her heart dancing; and peered out down the street, laughing excitedly, until he was lost in the darkness. Then, humming, she went back to the room and smoothed her hair before the glass.

'Mabel . . . who's *that*? ' called her mother from the kitchen. Mabel did not answer. She went and sat down again before the fire, and deliberately put a cushion behind her head. Her mouth seemed to ache with smiling, and she put her hand to it to press her lips together. Quite suddenly, her nerve gave way, and she began to cry. He had said nothing. Oh, what a fool she had been! He hadn't said anything! He hadn't said anything! And she'd let him see. . . .

V

In another place Viola and Septimus Bright were talking. Septimus had given a great sneeze, and stood waiting for its successor, which did not come. Viola, sitting at the table, with a neat shoe pointing at the fire, shrugged her shoulders at the delay in his answer.

'Of course,' she said in a firm voice, 'it's Agatha's business entirely.'

Septimus straightened himself again, giving the sneeze up. He pressed his lips tightly together before answering, and a slight twist of a smile appeared at one corner of his mouth.

'So long as she understands,' he said. 'I wonder if Joyce is serious.'

‘D’you think he isn’t?’ Viola looked up. Septimus stared in front of him.

‘I don’t know *anything* about it. . . . I’ve got my own business to look after.’

Viola smiled curiously, and her eyes had a gleam of contempt in them. But she did not move at all, so that Septimus did not notice the expression.

‘Meaning Mary Amerson,’ she said. ‘Is *she* coming on Sunday?’

‘Yes.’ Septimus was blinking, and wrinkling his nose for another abortive sneeze.

‘And Mr. Joyce? Roger Dennett’s coming.’ Viola looked defiantly at him as she spoke, ready for any expression.

‘Dennett!’ cried Septimus. ‘That fellow?’ He looked blackly across the room, and his fists clenched. ‘I can’t *stand* him.’ There was no answer. ‘D’you know that Dennett prevented my getting Person’s work at the office?’

‘What?’ Viola bent forward to listen, all alert.

‘He spoke in favour of Amerson. Cinch told me—told Amerson that he’d got Dennett to thank.’

‘Oh ho, Master Roger,’ whispered Viola, but a colour came into her cheeks.

‘It’s too bad. Dennett said old Amerson was ill. It had nothing to do with it at all. They all hate me there—they all hate anybody better than themselves, with their mud-larking. Fools.’

Viola leaned back in her chair again, thinking. Her breath seemed to catch. It meant that she had not the power she coveted, or that something very strong had moved Roger.

‘I expect he was fibbing,’ she suggested. He shook his head.

‘He’s a sneaking cad. He’s put Cadman against me. It’s Mary of course. He wanted her—only she . . . she preferred me.’

Viola’s distrust came back to her mind. All her at-

tempts to draw Roger had failed when she touched on Mary. She remembered that she had not been able to embarrass him, but also that she had not been able to get any satisfaction from his manner. She bit her lip, and kept still with an effort.

‘Don’t be a fool,’ she said suddenly. ‘He’s not a cad. You don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ll find out all about it. You leave it to me.’

‘I won’t have him and Mary here,’ Septimus said, and sneezed fiercely.

‘You leave it to me,’ she pressed. For she had made up her mind. ‘He’s coming, and Mary’s coming; and if you’re afraid you ought to be ashamed of yourself.’ Then, in a low voice she added, ‘*I’m* not afraid’. She was remembering that she and Mary had never been alone together, and that Roger had never been able to contrast them.

CHAPTER XI

SEPTIMUS CATCHES COLD

I

THE sneezes with which Septimus Bright punctuated the conversation between Viola and himself were the false dawn which preceded a severe cold in the head. They hovered round him for two days before, on Friday afternoon, they gave way to a sincere misery. Septimus became instantly human, and Agatha was at once motherly. Theirs was no feeling of disgrace in a cold, such as scrupulous people feel; to them a cold was an event, and to Agatha it was almost a delight, providing the cold were not her own. Septimus yielded to it in the evening, and sat, liquidly somnolent, before a fine fire. He was abandoned to his cold. He ruminated between sneezes, but obscurely, as he might have done half awake. Old magazines were brought out, so that he might study the changing physiognomy of great men at various stages in their life; novels hoarded by Agatha were produced; handkerchiefs, ammoniated quinine, eucalyptus—all those things which make a cold abominable to the invalid's fellow-sufferers—transformed the sitting-room into a chamber of horrors. Septimus sat stolidly through it all, solemn, grimly thoughtful. The solitude and the quietness gave him an opportunity of running over his grievances, and fondling them until they grew engrossing. He thought of Mary; he thought of Ted Amerson getting the job he should have had; he thought with a chill vengefulness of Roger Dennett. But all the time he was abandoned to his cold; it kept him definitely beside the fire. And whenever, while he was

reading, an indiscreet tear fell upon the page, he swore. He swore at the cold, but he suffered it; and he swore at Roger Dennett, whom he found intolerable. He did not think it a discredit to have a cold; but he was quite prepared to associate the inconveniences of so trifling an ailment with the smiling confident face of Roger, who never had colds.

Some part of the time he gave to planning. He was getting two pounds a week, and if Agatha married he would have a thousand pounds to add to his savings. These were between two and three hundred pounds, because both Viola and he had been left a hundred pounds apiece by their father as an encouragement to thrift. Even from his living wage, Septimus had saved regularly; he made up the books of a small company in Hampstead, and earned additional money by this means, as well as by the agency for a Canadian firm, which produced about ten shillings a week. He was a member of a building society, and was proposing to buy his house before marriage. In his mind the details were perfectly clear and admirable; but he wanted to discuss matters fully with Mary before doing anything further. He wanted to lay before her the plans he had made for her future, so that she should appreciate his thoroughly far-seeing providence. He had meant to do this on Sunday; but he supposed that the scheme would be overthrown if Roger Dennett and Robson Joyce came. What on earth were they coming for? Once he had a house of his own, nobody he disliked should visit there. He would have very few visitors—only those it was politic to invite. Mary would be a good housekeeper; he would be proud of her as only one who understood her true value could be proud. He would guard her jealously; to protect her would always be his first thought, so that she might never have the inclination to turn from him. He was always terrified in case she should be lured away by some handsomeness or some superficial quality in another man. There were so many men—a truism—and

some of them were more attractive than himself. She might not value men rightly, might miss the virtue of constancy, the painful throbbing cautiousness of his heart. He had never been in love before, and was frightened of losing his treasure before it was properly won. As soon as they were married, it would all be different, but he must first of all make sure of his possession, so that she did not escape. God alone knew what torments she gave him when they were out together, and other men gave her their passing attention! He felt some violent hatreds surging within him on these occasions, as sudden and bitter as salt on a raw wound; and once or twice he had drawn her abruptly aside, knowing all the time that his jealousy drew more glances, and some sneers at his own fearfulness. Yet so it was; he was consumed with love for her, and fear of her loss. He could never be sure of her, and he had never been sure of himself, because he had always felt that others undervalued him. And he would not share her with anybody! She must be his, alone and for ever. Septimus kept his mouth closed until struggling breath forced him to open it, and his eyes watered. Damn the cold! His long serious face, paler than ever, except for pink nostrils, was set with determination. His eyes were half-closed, looking with suspicion even upon the wall before him. Deep in his heart the covetousness of his love seemed to swell his heart to bursting.

II

Mary started out on Sunday afternoon to walk to Hampstead, for family arrangements never permitted of the younger girls having any riding money. So, when the rest of the family was gathered round the fire in the drawing-room, with the window closed, and a delightful inclination for repose stealing upon each person, Mary dressed herself for going out, and skirted Parliament Hill Fields. She could not see the murk that lay over the lowlands of

Kentish Town, although a few loiterers on Parliament Hill, sweeping round from the contemplation of the fair northern prospect, or the flying of kites by elderly children, beheld in the southerly direction the result of all the Sunday fires of Kentish Town, and Gospel Oak, and Camden Town. All Mary could see was the sodden pathway before her, and the lifeless dangling leaves on the neighbouring trees, and the scattered brown leaves that had already fallen. She picked her way along, to the sound of very faintly shrieking gravel, a sound which made her tread still more gently in case gravel really had some feeling, like the flowers she always feared to pluck. She found an extraordinary change in herself. Previously, she had never dared to look about her when she was out alone; she had timidly glanced to right and left, without criticism, ready only to delight in any pleasant thing that might catch her eye. Now, her engagement ring, warm upon her finger, gave her some new confidence; she held her head erect, and gazed full upon the world, as much as to say 'I am possessed'. So many engaged girls may be seen to scrutinize passers with clear eyes, secure in the accomplishment of their destiny. It was Mary's awakening to other things outside her own life; she had felt it already, and she felt it afresh. Now that her word was given, she could observe all those things which might have restrained her from ever giving her word. If Septimus could have seen her eyes as they looked frankly out from beneath raised lids he would have felt ever-ready suspicion choking him.

And Mary saw lovers looking at each other in ways that sometimes made her sigh, and sometimes laugh. She saw young men, with pipes and sticks, standing far away from the girls they addressed, while the girls swung this way and that, apparently, in their self-consciousness, looking for other friends who never came. She saw dogs running here and there, never going far from their masters; and little girls clutching tightly to the hands of other little girls. Always she saw dependence on others,

a fearfulness of being alone, an incapacity for solitude. There were some who walked briskly along and some who kept ever turning and stopping, a habit which she could not understand. She did not know that these girls and young men had come out to make friends because they had and could have no friends in their lodgings. Over from Hampstead came church bells tolling for those who wished to spend Pleasant Sunday Afternoons in a highly decorous fashion. There was a fine stillness in the air, such as she never knew on weekdays ; everybody seemed to have more time ; she saw many who never appeared in the fields or on the heath on any other day. It was Sunday as she had always known it, with shops discreetly shuttered, and old ladies in stiff dresses, and men strangely ill at ease in unusual garments. Silent streets, new dresses, clean boots, white collars, boys in bowler hats forced to think of girls because they could not play any game . . . all these things she saw, recognizing their superficial appearance without ever understanding what lay beneath. And she walked quickly in the direction of Hampstead until she came within imaginable distance of the Brights' home. Then she slackened her speed, and made a detour, for she was going to see her lover, and her short half-hour of freedom was nearly exhausted.

III

The Brights lived in a district which was called Hampstead by courtesy ; their road belonged rightly to the less notable district of Gospel Oak. The house was one of many which were exactly alike, of red brick, with mechanical stucco ornaments over the windows and over the porch, with a door streakily painted to imitate a natural grain, and a shining brass knocker. The Brights had casement-curtains in the windows, which made some of the neighbours rather envious, and they had been the first on the road to affix to their wrought-iron gate the little enamelled tin-

plate worded 'No hawkers, no circulars'. The neighbours, all aware of the appearance of such a plate the day after it was fixed, sniffed, 'Hn, swank,' but the idea tickled them, and they followed fashion in lifting their houses to the safe heights of respectability. 'No hawkers, no circulars,' in future stared steadily at the unfortunates who hawked and circulated from every gate in the road but one, and as this was an empty house the next tenants found entry to the house made difficult by an immense heap of folded bills and notices of bygone sales. But the Brights had not been snobbish; Agatha had seen the plates, and she had wished to avoid having her doorstep cleaned every day. She was quite free from any wish to better her neighbour; and indeed her neighbours on either side regarded her with unpleasantness, as too young and attractive to be a real widow or to enjoy their confidences. They spoke of her as '*Mrs.* Bright,' and watched her from behind their curtains whenever she went out, tossing their heads, and grimacing. Agatha, who was stupid and good-natured, had tried to be friendly, but had soon been reduced to 'Stoopid old cats,' and now made no advances, a fact which made her neighbours still more aggrieved.

When Mary arrived, Agatha was lying down, preserving her good looks, but Viola was sitting with Septimus beside the fire, and greeted her with cordiality, rising and taking her hands when they kissed. Mary went timidly to Septimus, but Viola cried, considerably:—

'Don't go near him, Mary. You'll catch his beastly cold.'

So Septimus could only follow them with his watery eyes, and heave a deep sigh as the door closed. He muttered to himself, and groaned miserably with some strange dismay that the cold engendered in his bosom, and rocked to and fro with his mouth grimly set.

While the girls were still upstairs, and while Viola was busily taking in every detail of Mary's costume with a perfect appreciation of its shortcomings, there was another knock at the front door.

'That's Roger,' Viola said. Mary started.

'Roger Dennett?' Her cheeks coloured, and she smiled. Viola's eyes were instantly shrewd in a different fashion.

'I'm so glad you're glad,' she said drily, and led the way to the door. Mary could have hesitated if it had been any other girl than Viola, but there was between them that slight constraint that checks feminine confidence, although Mary could have spoken freely upon any less intimate subject. But she could not have said anything truly intimate to Viola, and she would instinctively have hidden a feeling from her. Just as she felt, when she was with Viola, that her own hands must be red and large, and her walk graceless, so she felt now that there was something accomplished, finished, about Viola, as though she never said anything indiscreet, as though no words ever bubbled spontaneously from her heart. Yet she wondered why this should be so, and thought it wrong, since Viola was to be her sister-in-law. She followed in silence, noticing how prettily Viola's hair was done, and how beautifully her dress fitted.

And there was Roger, ill at ease on the hearthrug, talking to Septimus. She saw the quick twist of his shoulders, and the expression of his face as he smiled at Viola; and she stood by the door, not quite liking to come forward, her fingers still shyly upon the handle. She saw how Viola went confidently towards him, so close to Roger that her elbow must have touched his coat as they shook hands; and although his eyes were hidden as he looked a little down into Viola's face, Mary knew by the manner of his greeting that he was pleased, and even happy. And as she looked, a strange throb shook her heart, and a swift thought ran through her mind; for in that moment she realized Viola's fascination, and Roger's vulnerability, and the fact that she loved Roger better than anything in the world.

IV

By that time Roger had seen her; and he gave an exclamation.

‘This is jolly!’ he said. ‘How are you, Mary?’

Septimus bent forward in his chair, to look at them, and Mary could not meet Roger’s eyes. She knew now why she had not been able to picture him, as she had pictured his mother and Edie. Her eyes refused just as her mind had refused, and her heart beat fast in spite of the attempt she made to be perfectly cool. It was as though some trembling ecstasy had descended upon her soul, as though she heard, far distant, the morning stars singing together in thanksgiving, for this new wonderful knowledge raised her beyond all the pain she had felt. In the first exquisite moment of discovery, she had neither doubt nor fear, no thought of what might follow or injure her happiness. Only this she knew, that she loved Roger, that her life was for the first time brimming with a sublime belief in goodness and the happiness she had never known. It trembled in her heart and in her tender eyes, that saw nothing but the vision of her own love, like some dream in which the soul of beauty stood revealed and aspiring.

She did not know that she had given her hand, or that they had both turned away. Vaguely, she could hear Roger speaking, but she did not know what he said, nor what Viola was saying in reply. She did not know that she had seated herself, with her hands folded, as simply as a child, behind Septimus, and where she might see only Roger; everything seemed away from her, distant in some far place where no thought of duty or sacrifice might enter. She only felt suddenly ennobled, forgetful of all but her new sweet knowledge; and the jerkings of Septimus, as he strained to catch a glimpse of her, were unknown and unregarded.

‘I thought you might have forgotten to come,’ Viola was saying, archly.

‘Cruel!’ cried Roger. ‘When it’s been in my mind all the week.’

‘Nothing else?’ she questioned.

‘Not a scrap.’ He looked laughingly back, showing his

white teeth in a grin of glee at an exaggeration so pardonable. 'Hardly been able to attend to my work.'

'Hn,' grunted Septimus.

'Oh, well, *you've* been at *home*,' Roger said. 'So you haven't known anything about it.' Septimus was thinking: You attended to it on Monday, when you backed Amer-son.

'He's been stupid with his cold . . . grumbling,' Viola said. 'I don't know what Mary thinks of it all. . . .' Mary was smiling, but she made no answer. 'She's very quiet. It's the first time *she's* been *in* this house.' Viola sent a side-long glance at Roger, who tingled at the allusion to that windy evening's escapade. His thoughts went back to the evening, and to the little photograph, and the hasty kiss. Even the under-knowledge of Viola's nature, revealed in the kiss and the reference to it, could not rob his memory of its satisfaction. She wore another dress this evening, but it suited her as exactly as the daring striped gown had done, and in comparison Mary looked ill-dressed. There was in fact no comparison between them, for Mary was shy and quiet, and Viola was at her ease, confident in her reliance upon her power to please, not held back by any unsureness of herself. His glance rested upon Viola in contentment as he sat comfortably and remembered how uneasy he had felt under Septimus Bright's sour gaze.

'How's your father, Mary?' Roger asked. Septimus rasped his fingers together: why hadn't he thought to ask that? Mary roused herself from her dream.

'I'm afraid he's just the same,' she made answer. 'He doesn't seem to change much.'

Septimus glowered silently at Roger, and bit his lip. Everybody preferred to talk to Dennett; they all thought that because he was so confident he was necessarily the better man. Well, they would find their mistake . . . one day. It wasn't always to the swift that victory was given. . . . There was such a thing as being *too* sure. He wished he could see Mary; but he did not dare to ask her to come

nearer in case she should refuse, and in case he should thus be humiliated. It would all be different when . . . when they were married. But now he must be very careful. . . . He pushed his chair silently back, and Roger saw him look stealthily over his shoulder, at Mary.

'Poor devil!' he thought. 'Never to have a minute's peace.'

'Sep's been very sick,' dared Viola, 'about Ted Amerson . . . at the office.'

'Oh, Viola . . . and we've been so glad!' exclaimed Mary.

'Well, you see . . . it's a bit nasty for Sep. Of course, he's glad for Ted's sake. . . . I wonder how a thing like that's decided. Do *you* know, Roger?' Viola turned to him as she spoke, with a glance of innocent inquiry.

'I *do* know in this case,' he admitted. 'It was the fact that Mr. Amerson was ill.'

Mary looked from one to the other eagerly.

'Of course, Septimus is bound to get on,' she said, in a trembling, exalted voice.

'Not if everything's put in my way,' Septimus muttered.

'See, Mary, it's all a question of competition. . . . I suppose Ted asked for it?' suggested Viola.

Roger shook his head.

'Oh no,' he said. 'I told Cadman about Mr. Amerson. I think it was largely a matter of chance. It wasn't any question of favouritism, I mean. . . . It'll be made up to your brother somehow, I'm sure.'

'Hn, *will* it?' grunted Septimus, blowing his nose. 'Not so sure of that.'

Mary still did not appreciate his grievance. She could not have imagined anybody being envious of Ted; it seemed to her splendid that he should have got the job, and splendid that Roger should in any way have assisted to obtain it for him.

'I'm very glad for Ted's sake,' Viola said. 'But—a—it *does* seem a little hard on Sep.'

‘But I’m sure he doesn’t grudge Ted . . . poor boy, he’s worked so hard,’ Mary put in.

‘You don’t understand,’ Septimus jerked savagely in his chair. ‘Not a bit!’

‘Hoo. . . . Sorry I mentioned it!’ sneered Viola. ‘I didn’t mean to get you *that* snub, Mary.’

A great knock resounded through the house.

‘Bless my soul!’ cried Roger. Viola hushed him very familiarly.

‘It’s only Mr. Joyce,’ she explained. ‘You know him, don’t you?’

V

Mr. Joyce’s arrival very speedily produced Agatha, whom Mary met for the first time. She was awed by these two dashing strangers; they so clearly belonged to a world of greater experience than her own. Something of the understanding between them struck her; she looked at Viola, and found that she was quite at her ease. She wished she felt comfortable like that. If Roger had not been there, she would have felt very lonely; but an occasional shy glance at him showed his handsome face quite smiling and ready, and she drew an inspiration for her courage from his presence. She could look frankly at Septimus, for she had not yet begun to realize that actual things were more powerful than her dreams. She still hardly realized what her newly-perceived love carried in its train. She grew slowly confident and happy, turning every now and then to Roger, and smiling at him.

Agatha kept up a conversation with Mr. Joyce, and their eyes lingered in meeting, and when Mr. Joyce had more tea the passing seemed unduly protracted. Mary thought, quite naturally, ‘they look as though they were in love,’ and began to smile sympathetically at them. But soon, across the tea-table, she felt that Viola was talking to Roger, and that he was engrossed in her; and some chill struck her heart. She could not talk to Septimus, who

was beside her, very quiet and irritated still at her failure to set him above Ted. They were the only silent ones, except when Roger spoke to Mary. Then she started, and answered so eagerly that Septimus's jaw grew rigid, and he became colder and more abrupt than before. The silver on the table glittered and shone, and the white cloth glistened; the pleasant jingle and clatter of spoons and plates, and the merry voices, all had their soothing influence upon Mary, who was enjoying so gentle a respite from the duties of home. And she was so proud of Roger that she found herself listening whenever he spoke, and paying more attention to what was happening on the other side of the table than to the grim silence of Septimus. He had become unreal, because she had been carried into unreality by her thoughts. Somehow he had never been very real; he had made her invent a sort of relation with him, and they were complete strangers to one another.

When tea was over, they all moved away from the table, and sat near the fire. And to Viola's chagrin, Roger sat beside Mary and talked to her. Viola tried to dislodge him, without avail. Septimus sat glowering in his chair over the fire. And Mary was completely forgetful, listening to a description of Edith Dennett's prowess.

'Is Edie quite well?' she asked Roger, presently.

'Very busy, with her Seasons . . . as happy as a frog.'

'How unkind—are frogs so happy? I think she plays awfully well for a little girl. Don't you?'

'Her scales are shocking, of course,' Roger hinted. 'She goes at them wickedly. But she really seems to be getting better. And she's very good-tempered over it. . . .'

'Who's *that* you're talking about?' Viola demanded, coming and standing beside Roger.

Mary looked up as he explained, and saw something in Viola's face that made her heart beat suffocatingly. She closed her eyes, feeling quite sick. For she knew that her old impression was true, and that Viola loved Roger. Something told her far more quickly than thought. She

knew! Her dream seemed quickly to fade, and she looked in horror at Septimus. From the depths of his chair he was watching her.

VI

'By the way, Dennett,' called Joyce. 'Cadman tell you I wanted sample pictures and a dummy of "Portrait Painters of the World"? I'm going to see Jobbs on Thursday, and I want to talk to him about it.'

'Dummy,' said Roger. 'Why the paper's not made yet. He didn't tell me.'

'*Any* old paper'd do for the dummy. So long as it's quarto,' Joyce exclaimed.

'Quarto? It's a demy book, isn't it?' Roger asked.

'Royal Quarto.'

'What's that? 'Twenty by twenty-five? You don't mean it?'

'Why not?' They all looked at Roger, because his cheeks had paled, and his voice was agitated. Mary could not understand the question, and she was only faintly interested.

'I'm almost sure I ordered demy. I'm positive I ordered demy. Good lord! Sure you're right, Joyce?'

'You've made a mistake, my boy!' cried Joyce.

Instinctively, Mary put out her hand in Roger's direction.

'I thought he said demy! Why it's nearly made now. It's too late to stop it!'

'Oh, Roger!' cried Mary.

'I expect it's all right,' Viola said in a hard voice. Septimus still sat back in his chair, but he could not help smiling.

'Well, there's a nice old mess!' grumbled Joyce.

'Oh my boy, oh my boy!' Roger's hands had moved on his knees. He was overpowered. The mistake, which sounded so trivial to these lay minds, was, as he recognized, of the greatest importance. If he had made it, then it would mean that the firm had about sixty reams of paper

for which no use could be found. A book on such a large paper was a rare thing for Tremlett & Grove to handle; and so extraordinary a mistake would naturally mean a big row. It probably meant that he would be dismissed.

'That's spoilt his evening!' laughed Agatha. Mary was so indignant for Roger's sake that she shot a quick, wrathful glance across the room.

'You'll find you've ordered it right,' she murmured. But Roger sat for a moment longer with a rigid face, and his eyes staring. He was going back in his mind to the day when the order was given. He remembered the *look* of the order, and could see the word 'demy' as clearly as though it were before him. How could he have been such a fool? Surely Cadman had told him 'demy'! He couldn't prove it; whatever his instructions had been. Cadman must have given them verbally and his jotting would be destroyed by this time. He would have to turn up the counterfoil the next morning. But how on earth could he have made such a blunder? He tried to recall the events of that day, to explain to himself how the mistake had arisen. It was to no purpose. He was too agitated to see it clearly. All he could feel was that the mistake had been made. It was horrible to be so sure and so helpless! If it cost him his situation, of what avail all his plans for the future? He looked round straight into Mary's imploring eyes, and the sight made him grow steady at once, because he realized that he must not display his fear before them. When he turned with a smile to Viola he saw that she had turned away. At the other side of the room Joyce was brushing his heavy moustache, and looking uncomfortably at his boots. They were all uncomfortable, for nobody likes to be associated with a mistake, or with a person who has made a mistake. Roger was aware of an atmosphere of suspicion, as though they had judged him and found him a wholesale dealer in mistakes. Only Mary still sat with tragedy in her face, and a subtle pity.

'It's all right, Mary,' Roger said, patting her hand. 'I

must have been dreaming. Don't you worry 'bout it.' Only Viola and Mary noticed that his voice trembled slightly.

Viola shrugged her shoulders.

VII

Roger's first frantic thought was, 'Oh, she's gone, she's gone! What can I do?' He thought no longer of his work, but only of Viola; and he could not resent her sudden aversion from failure and mischance. He could only see a gulf yawning before him. He had never previously cared much what anybody thought of him, or of his actions; but just at this moment he was angry with Mary for showing her naïve sympathy, and cowardly before Viola's distaste. He saw her smallest frown, and the air of boredom which she turned upon him, with a feeling that approached abject fear. He had never wished to pose as immaculate, or manly; poses of any sort were his abomination, and he would ordinarily have turned scornfully aside from such weakness as he now felt. But in the situation of this instant his heart clamoured for Viola's belief in him; he would have pleaded with her if they had been alone—not in a panic, but rather humbly, as he might have apologized to some one wronged. It was perfect irony that he should find sympathy in Mary's face alone, and that he should resent seeing it there; for he was thinking Mary wantonly weak, in giving herself to Bright, and he did not want to see any fair virtue in her. Some unexpected pride made him emulate Viola's shrug as he observed it, and his face became red with a sudden sweep of consciousness that she was undervaluing him for the first time. He was too honest in his thoughts to pretend to himself that he did not care; but it startled him to find how important he found her feeling. More than anything else, it emphasized his failure. He had failed in a simple matter of care, yet failure, or slip of any kind made her suddenly hard and unapproachable. He became eager to justify himself in

her eyes—not by explanation, but by splendidly contrasted action. He must recover his lost ground. He must build up again what, seemingly, he had lost by his suggestion of incompetence. The bitter sense of disadvantage was strong upon him, as though he was against odds for the first time. Before, he had taken buffets cheerfully, and with the recognition that they were bound to come to any young man who fought alone; now, he felt abruptly beaten, wavering between some forlorn hope and a retreat. It was fresh, and unwelcome, because the issue was complex. Not only might he lose the situation, but he might also lose an esteem he had just begun to covet. He could not *bear* to be misjudged on a single piece of carelessness. Yet what could he say to her, with four others present, and her manner so difficult to combat?

‘If you explained to Mr. Cadman?’ suggested Mary, in a low voice.

‘Oh, that ——’ Roger spoke in a thick, angry way. ‘I’m not worrying about *that*!’

Mary felt the savage resentment of her sympathy as though it had been a blow. She shrank perceptibly away from him, and her lips trembled for an instant. And Roger did not apologize, because he was full of his own misery, and had no time for any of his causing. His expression frightened Mary in its fierce bitterness, and kept her silent, with her heart like water in her breast, full of foreboding.

VIII

Later, Agatha and Joyce disappeared—for music in the drawing-room. The four who were left below could hear Agatha’s rich voice ringing through ‘The Promise of Life’ and ‘The River of Years,’ and then they paid no further attention. Viola seemed cold, for she kept near the fire, and Roger, waiting for her glance, found that whenever she looked at him there was a sort of chilling disdain in the eyes which so surprisingly refused to meet his. She hardly ever spoke, and when her voice was heard it had no feeling

in it. He found himself angry—not merely wounded, but actively resentful of her studied lack of interest. It bit into his consciousness and seemed like a weight upon his heart. . . . If they had been alone he would have dared all and asked her to marry him, for the sake of provoking some explanation . . . but they were not alone, and, as it rested with her, Viola appeared to have made up her mind that they should not be alone. She stayed near Septimus. Even Mary felt the constraint that was in the air, and was torn between indignation at Viola's coldness, and the emotion which now threatened to complicate her own relations with Roger and Septimus. She felt that she could not sit still, that anything was better than this stupefying inaction. Her hands clasped and unclasped in tune with her eager thoughts and she often looked with unconcealed doubt from one to the other of her companions, wondering how they might be brought together in harmony. The evening seemed to drag. Every now and then she could hear a fresh song in the room above, and she wondered where Mr. Joyce was sitting—whether just above Septimus, by the fire, or above herself, further away from the fire. She did not know where the piano stood, so she could not imagine the room at all. And she seemed to have so few things to say, and they were so poor; the others could not want to hear about her father; her mother she *could* not talk about; everything that came into her mind seemed trivial and dull. How strange it was that she should have felt so different that afternoon at the Dennetts'. There, everything had seemed valuable enough to say, and to bring other things tripping from her mind. Here—she sighed at the knowledge that her life had only very trivial things to record. So, perhaps, it was with all of them. Septimus, when he was alone with her, only spoke of themselves in a strained way, or of his plans to make money; or else he was silent. Viola and Roger were naturally more talkative, but they were quiet at this time. And for herself, she wanted only to hear Roger. . . .

At last, she determined to go. It was nine o'clock, and she was quite exhausted, with her trying days and nights, and the difficulty of the evening's affairs. Viola protested, but Septimus said, sourly:—

‘Better let her go.’

Roger rose, as well; and Septimus repented of his evil speech, which had been uttered in the hope that, by leaving early, Mary might leave alone. The two young men were left together for a few moments.

‘I’m awfully sorry about the job at the office,’ Roger said. ‘It was—it always *must* be rather rotten, directly two chaps are in the running. . . .’

‘Oh. . . . I *knew* I shouldn’t have any chance if *you* were asked,’ Septimus made answer, staring at the fire. Roger stopped suddenly and looked at him.

‘It wasn’t anything of *that* kind,’ he protested. ‘I was asked as a matter of business. I didn’t offer any opinion on your capability.’

‘Oh, it wasn’t *that* I meant,’ sneered Septimus. Roger checked himself, and smiled.

‘You mean you think I don’t like you?’ he asked. Septimus looked at him strangely, and then away again at the fire, without replying. Roger watched his movement curiously, waiting for some indication of feeling. ‘I don’t know anything about you at all.’

‘Yes, well I know something about you,’ Septimus said, in a low voice.

‘I hope it’ll make you a better man,’ put in Roger, with ironic spirit. ‘And I hope your cold will be better by the morning,’ he added.

‘I’ll *see* it is.’ As he spoke, Septimus was compelled to blow his nose; and before Roger could inquire the precise drift of so mysterious a remark, the girls had returned, and he bade farewell to the invalid. He found that Viola looked at him quite coolly as he shook her hand.

IX

As they walked down the road together, Roger was hotly silent, his mouth set in a stiff angry smile at Septimus Bright's assertion that he was an enemy, and his heart bitter with the fierceness of his resentment of Viola's change. He walked with a perfunctory air at Mary's side, blind to her little imploring glances. They reached the border of the heath, and breathed the fresh searching wind, and saw above them the pure stars, and around them the barren darkness of dry empty hedges and trees. And Mary felt that her heart would break. Very few people were to be seen; for the night was too cold for the loitering lovers of autumn, and most of the seats were as black as the paths. Only occasionally two heavily-wrapped adventurers, without homes, and with only a solitary room apiece in somebody else's house, might be seen together, dimly amorous in the gloom. They walked on, and Roger shook himself free from his irritation.

'Bright's not looking very grand,' he said; and his tone made Mary shudder.

'Roger,' she began. 'I don't think you ought to be angry with me.'

'Angry? I beg pardon, Mary . . . I'm not angry with you. I'm rather worried,—that's all.' He was full of penitence; but he was not meeting her mood.

'But I knew . . . you seemed angry that I *should* know,' she persisted, in a trembling voice. 'I only tried to show that I *did* know. . . . You know I don't . . . I shouldn't . . . I don't know what I mean!'

There was no answer from Roger for a minute. Then he blurted out.

'It may be a very bad thing for me at the office. It all depends on how it's handled, and what Cadman feels. It rather does me in, if he doesn't feel satisfied, or if it gets put before him in a bad light. You see, Mary, when you've

made a mistake, you're not always able to respond to sympathy. Something catches you, eh ?'

'I know,' she said breathlessly.

'I felt I wanted to get away from everything. And I didn't want to show I was worried—I don't know why other people *shouldn't* know ; but it's very natural. I felt like a dying animal, creeping away. . . .'

'And I was coming after you !' cried Mary, high-strung. Even in his distress, Roger could not help grinning at so naïve a speech ; and yet he was touched at her true-heartedness.

'I was only indignant because you weren't deceived,' he said, gently.

Mary was close beside him looking at the dark grass, and beyond, at the rising ground ; and her eyes were burning. The open space was so wide, and their course so much a matter of instinct, that her every fear was alert, just as the new desire to serve Roger was active and insistent. It seemed so hopeless to her to venture into this large, tractless world.

'If that had been all !' she said, so quietly that he did not hear her.

'But I've been quite frank now. You understand, I'm not afraid. I'm bound to get through all right. But mistakes are so beastly. . . . I'm so sorry I was rude.'

'You're trying to cheer me !' she protested.

'And myself !'

'And I'm disheartening you. . . .'

'Not a bit ! You're returning good for evil, as you always do. But, Mary, you're taking it too seriously. It's serious for me, because it makes me feel sick. There's no knowing how many other mistakes I've made. Only the mistakes are *not* made. Only one, here and there. It just happens that this is a bad one. See ? So dry your tears . . . I'm not dead yet. And let's talk about something prettier.'

But Mary, being far-sunken in misery, was being miser-

able now with a sort of gusto; and she was not easily turned from her contemplation of this wreck of Roger's prospects.

'I'm so tired of being put off!' she said, sadly.

'By me?' Roger looked down at her face, and for the first time saw how white it was. 'I say, I say . . . *this* won't do, Mary.'

At the sympathy in his voice, Mary broke down. He saw her lips quiver, and she stopped, holding her muff in desperate disguise to her cheek. Roger stopped, too, and put his arm round her. To his horror, Mary was shaking violently. The breeze went rushing by; but he hardly knew it as he held Mary, hushing her with unconscious little soothing phrases such as he might have used to Edie. They seemed quite alone, stranded together, each painfully ignorant of the other's thoughts, both moved beyond means of expression. And when Mary's fit of silent weeping was checked she knew only that they were strangers still. She could not be frank, and tell him even what she understood of herself; and Roger, with his eager mind held back by delicacy from trying wholly to fathom her feeling, was struck dumb. In silence they moved slowly on; but he had taken her arm, very gently trying to show at least some understanding of her reserve.

The wind had dropped again to the cool keen air of winter; and the path lay dark before them. They could see pale lights in front, steadily shining, although to Mary they were blurred and trembling. She was thinking that she had not made him understand; that she had only driven them farther into misunderstanding. And Roger, who could not imagine that she was agitated solely on his account, sought some other, more complex, explanation. Yet how could he, without crude impertinence, make any inquiry? He thought, quite distinctly, that it was out of the question. Then, suddenly, he plunged.

'Is it Bright?' he asked. 'Something I can tackle?'

Mary's arm grew rigid.

‘He’s *nothing*!’ she cried. ‘*Nothing*.’

‘Then . . . Put the poor devil out of his misery, Mary.’

‘Roger!’

‘He knows it as clear as day. It’s in his face—he can’t believe you.’ He was urging her very quietly. ‘He’s as miserable . . .’

She half drew away from him.

‘Roger, I can’t talk about it with you. I’m not thinking of him ——’

‘But you *ought* to think of him.’

Mary caught her breath. Was Roger so clear about her? Had she already betrayed herself? She saw that he thought she was being cruel; well, she had been worse than cruel. Cruelty was but one little addition to the guilt she felt weighing her down.

‘I won’t talk about him,’ she said, definitely.

‘I oughtn’t to have said anything. But you’re making yourself ill. It’s absurd to do that.’

She made no answer, staring straight in front of her from a marble face.

‘Roger, you don’t understand anything about me—I don’t think you’ve been rude; but very kind and good. I know how good you are. . . .’

‘Good *God*!’ Roger’s ejaculation was out before he could stop it.

‘I couldn’t bear that you should misunderstand me.’

‘Misunderstand?’ He looked round them, and at the path in front, and then at Mary; and he shook his head. ‘I don’t know what you mean. Misunderstand? I give it up,’ he said. ‘I think we’re talking about different things.’

Mary sighed, and they reached the road before either spoke again.

X

‘Oh, *here* you are!’ Grace opened the front door, and Mary stepped into the house, catching, as she entered, the particular smell of the Amersons’ house, which she always

associated with the idea of home. It was not unpleasant—simply the distinctive odour which this house, in common with others, held and disseminated. It came from the furniture and the atmosphere, the fires, the carpets, the outdoor hanging coats and hats of the male Amersons; and it was unforgettable. Mary drew off her gloves, and stood for an instant at the foot of the stairs. ‘Hurry up,’ Grace went on. ‘We’re just ready for supper.’

Mary went slowly upstairs, thinking. Her feet made no noise upon the warm stair-carpet; there was a light on the first landing, and her father’s door was tightly closed. Farther up, the stairs were covered with oil-cloth, and she had to step delicately. An oil-lamp stood on a small table outside her bedroom door, and it smoked a little, so that, as she passed, she stopped a moment to lower the wick. Mabel’s door was closed. Mary went into her own room, and took off her coat and hat, standing there for a moment, dull with a sort of stupid complication of unhappiness. Then, sighing, she came out of the room again. It seemed so strange that Mabel’s door should be closed; she could not understand it. She almost went to the door, but stopped herself, and went downstairs again. All through supper, she sat, not speaking, white and still. And Gower laughed away over his own jokes, and Mrs. Amerson ate cold meat steadily with an air of abstraction. Grace was in a militant mood; and Tom was lofty in silence, his mouth slightly open in a self-important rumination. Mary did not see any of these things, because she was thinking of Roger. And whatever might be her unhappiness, and the increased reason for unhappiness, she was beginning to feel more brave; it was unreasonable, for her troubles were in an embryonic stage; but she had found an idea—her love for Roger—and any idea, however futile, however silly, or sentimental, or noble, was better than the aching uselessness of her recent thoughts. She felt stronger; she had the remembrance of Roger, puzzled, not altogether sympathetic, but really honest, to stay in her mind. She

could remember his arm against her own, steady, firm. . . . And she had still not begun to think of Septimus as yet; he was always a vague shadow in her consideration of the evening. The main figures were Roger and Viola; Roger sore and angry, Roger penitent to herself, but mercifully and strangely blind; Viola cold, calculating, unforgiving. In Viola's unforgivingness Mary found a little warm flame that comforted her. She was so rapt that the clearing of the table was done in a dream; she heard somebody say that Mabel had gone to bed; and she prepared to lock up the house.

Then, suddenly, a strange cry sounded from the floor above; and they ran upstairs to find Gran'ma on her knees beside the bed; and Mr. Amerson lying there dead, with his dull eyes staring straight upwards, and his hands folded upon his breast in a peace that he had never found in life. Gran'ma was speechless now, but her withered hands passed with a terrible unseeingness over her son's hands and arms, very gently, as though he had been a child, and as though she were trying to soothe him into sleep.

CHAPTER XII

THE BETRAYAL

I

MARY had left home half-way through the afternoon to go to tea at the Brights': it was not until after tea that Mabel slipped out of the house, closing the door behind her as secretly as she could, and pausing a moment at the gate in case she might be heard opening it. The evening had already closed in, and the street lamps in Marjorie Road were lighted. Mabel walked quickly away from the house, to keep her appointment, made on Friday evening, with Bert Moggerson. She knew she was unwise to make any appointment; she was saying to herself, 'I'm a *fool*, I'm a *fool*!' even as she hurried along; and she would be early at the trysting place. In every action, she had plunged herself deeper into commitment with him, and she could not see it. The stages had latterly been so feverish that she had been carried on by the sheer momentum which they created. Once he had kissed her, she had felt only a petulant barrier set up between herself and his desire to kiss her frequently; sooner or later her resistance was always bound to give way to her own desire to be kissed. She had been left alone, cut off from the others, with no chance of guidance, and no capacity for thought. And while she called herself a fool she hurried to obey the dictation of her foolishness.

They had arranged to meet in Highgate Road, near Parliament Hill Fields, at six o'clock. She could see others waiting, and she thought, as she always did, that the pass-

ing young men pursued her. She could see them throwing side glances as she passed, or staring at her; and her shoulders twitched with self-consciousness. They *were* awful, she thought . . . staring. In her heart she had formed a secret resolve, although she could hardly believe that she would have the courage to insist, when the time came. She had resolved to say to Bert . . . that she couldn't go on *as they were* . . . that . . . well, that a nice girl *couldn't*. . . . If he didn't respond—her heart failed her. It meant all the shame of being jilted, for everybody knew that she . . . well, he'd kept on coming; and she'd let them think . . . She'd let them think what the family believed—that he wanted her. He'd *shown* he wanted her. Then why didn't he speak? She couldn't go on seeing him, meeting him, if he wasn't going to marry her. People'd begin to think . . . It had gone on too long for Mabel to believe it could stop suddenly now. He *must* know, if he was a gentleman! She knew that she did not dare to lose him. There'd be awful trouble if she lost him. She must, *must* have it out with him; but she must keep him. She could not let him go; she could not bear to think of his going. At the smallest suggestion of bringing their 'friendship' to an end, Mabel's heart melted and came creeping from her eyes in stealthy drops. She wiped the tears away, and worked herself up to a pitch of shamed, frightened, blustering indignation. It was her one resource—the resource of those who are weak and obstinate and in a difficulty. She walked on, up and down, catching eyes, and jerking her own away. The yellow horse tram-cars tinkled slowly up the hill, and waited for each other, and went on; and very few people seemed to ride in them on this particular evening, although she remembered having seen them crowded. On each side of the road walked young people in pairs, girls laughing, young men talking, all sorts of men in their best clothes, with dogs at their heels, or children running beside them. Mabel stood still, looking for Moggerson. 'I shall say to him . . .' she was thinking.

And Moggerson came down the road, approaching her in the gloom.

II

'Here you are,' he said. 'Hope I haven't kept you waitin'.'

'You *have*!' Mabel snatched her hand away. He drew out his watch, under a lamp-post.

'Oh, I say! It's only three parce. . . . Not upset, are you?'

Mabel looked across the grey fields, with a sob in her throat.

'Yes I am!' she said.

Moggerson took her arm, scrutinizing her. Mabel's lip trembled, and at first she made as if to withdraw her arm; then, finally, she suffered it to remain, and pressed Moggerson's arm against her side. She was in a tumult. All the ways she had thought of, to bring him to his knees, and to make him her own, faded from her mind. She was a child at once, frightened, angry, pleading. Moggerson seemed quite cool.

'That's bad,' he admitted. 'I'm sorry I was late. I couldn't get here before. I thought you'd sure to be late.'

'So I ought to have been,' Mabel said, pursuing the fruitless squabbling. He suited his step to her own, and they walked arm in arm together.

'Bin a fine day,' Moggerson ventured. 'A—Yes, I'm sorry I was late. Shall we go across the Heath?' She seemed to agree; but it was in silence, with an inclination of her head. Moggerson shot swift little glances into the dusk: when Mabel looked at his profile her heart sank, because he seemed so sure of himself. But she could not understand him. Her mind, fed with sentimentality and her mother's weak arrogant stupidity, could only see one thing clearly—the need of Moggerson's definite proposal of marriage. She saw nothing else; she felt humiliated and

angry, but these emotions only tied her tongue and added to her helplessness.

'Had some fun at our place yesterday,' Moggerson was saying. 'Guv'nor wadden't there. Some old man came in to see him . . . shabby old fellow . . . and we showed him into the waitin' room. Then we went and kept on goin' into the waitin' room, and beggin' his pardon, and droppin' things outside the door till he'd got a fair old sick with the place. Then we sent the kid in to say the guv'nor wadden't there, and that old Tommy was out. He didn't half rap on about it. When he'd gone, we just roared!' He laughed again, in recollection. 'Yes . . . some old feller, he was . . . missin' link, I should think. Come to borrow half a crown, I expect.'

'*Had* he!' exclaimed Mabel. 'Oh, poor old man.'

'Eh? Oo, business is business. . . . Lot of people come in . . . want to see the guv'nor on *private business*. He says he never sees people on *private business*. Turns out they want a job . . . envelope addressing. On their uppers. . . . Got no time for that sorter thing at *our* place. Too busy doin' our *own* work.'

'N-hn,' said Mabel. 'Still, he might have been hungry.' She was too weak, and too eager to show interest in the things that interested him, to exhibit immediate petulance at his anecdote-mongering.

'Hooh! Rot. . . . Let him go to the workhouse . . . All this old age pensions. . . . What I mean . . . pamperin' the poor. You can't do it . . . in the stress and hurry of modern life.'

Mabel succumbed: she could not argue with him, even about this, without giving way to tears.

'No, I s'pose not,' she said, painfully.

'Wouldn't do at *all*!' he went on. 'Why, s'posin' we were to . . . See what I mean: we . . . got to do our . . . work. If you're always lookin' after other *people* . . . you go to the wall yourself. It's sink or swim, you know.'

'Course,' said Mabel. 'Oo, I can see. No, you couldn't.'

Must be *awful* to send them away. I coon't do it. When a man comes to the door with bootlaces . . . we *always* make Mary go.'

Moggerson roared. Yes, that was very funny . . . 'make Mary go.'

'Bet she *likes* it,' he said, his eyes narrowed in.

'She gives them bread. . . . They throw it into the next garden. She *is* a silly. . . .'

'Yerce . . . ' Moggerson commented. 'Not very smart . . . '

'I never give them anything,' Mabel hastened to say. 'I *wouldn't*. . . . They say it's wrong to do it. . . .'

'Weller *course*. . . . It's a . . . it's not common sense. If they're poor . . . it's their own fault. Course, I'm sorry for them. What I mean, no doubt some of them have been unlucky, and all that; but if . . . you . . . give to people like that, you're deprivin' yourself of the necessities of life!' He jerked his head at the 'no doubt,' and the concluding words.

Thus, in perfect agreement on one subject they walked together across the Heath in the dusk. High above, a wonderful long stream of rooks trailed homeward, crying aloud, and flying steadily, until the leading birds disappeared while those which followed continued still to emerge as minute specks on the western sky.

III

Once the dusk had crept down upon the wide Heath, night fell quickly; and presently only a sudden, murmuring voice from the darkness told them that they were not alone. Very seldom footsteps sounded upon the broad path they trod, and once a man stopped to light his pipe, showing a faint pink blur of fingers and a startling gleam of his unknown face. Still Mabel was silent, and as Moggerson had no further anecdotes to tell of merry official pranks, she fell again to the study of her grievance. He

didn't care for her a *bit*; he was just as callous as men always were; all men were the same, cruel, bitter. . . . Moggerson felt her arm twitch, felt a sob shake her body; and then she stopped.

'Not *upset*, are you?' he asked, with a strange note in his voice.

Suddenly it was flung at him! All Mabel's pent-up thoughts and flying fragments of dismay, anger, shame, distress, came tumbling from her mouth in a stream of volubility. He didn't think . . . *what* did he think? . . . Girls . . . fellows always the same . . . think they can play . . . she'd had enough of it . . . tahrd of it all . . . wished she'd never seen him . . . never had a minute's peace . . . thought he could play with her. . . . Until the tears that were provoked by her hysterical outbreak checked her tongue and fairly drove her, crying and helpless, into his arms, while the night stars came twinkling out one by one and seemed like a thousand eyes watching their inevitable descent into vituperation.

Moggerson had listened in a sullen state, stirred sometimes by the consciousness of holding the winning cards, not at all hurt or offended by anything she said or the manner of its expression. His was not a mind to hold any abstract notion of dignity, or reticence; to him reserve was simply politic, or a lie, and outspokenness was good or bad in the degree to which it played into his hands. When Mabel ceased, his arms were around her and his face against hers, and he consciously felt the quivering sobs that shook her from head to foot. He felt her hat against his, and knew that his had tilted very slightly. He felt her hair touch his temple. Almost he would have shrugged, for he tasted success in bountiful quantity.

'Who said they didn't . . .' he said. 'What's it all about? I never said I didn't want you. Course I want you. Good Lord! Anybody'd think I'd said I never wanted you . . .'

They stood together in the darkness; and Mabel's heart jumped. Her anger dropped away like a shawl.

'You didn't say *anything*!' she sobbed, with triumph and the half-hearted grizzle of a child that prolongs her anger through shamed unwillingness to admit that it has passed.

'Well . . . I . . . a . . . I been worried . . . I thought you understood.' His bright eyes were looking beyond her into the darkness.

'I didn't know *anything* . . . you never said you *cared*,' she whispered.

'Well, how *could* I? What I mean. I've been sa busy . . . An' worried, and all that . . .'

'You *might* have . . .' Mabel's reproach was checked by a wandering sob, and they did not speak for a minute.

'Well, you're all right now?' He brought her face round until he could kiss her cold lips. 'Aren't you? Not goin' to grizzle any more . . . Little girl. . . .'

The colour was in her cheeks now, and her eyes were bright. She was silent; but he prompted her.

'No,' she said, very softly, in the most lingering surrender. They walked along, and Moggerson looked at her several times. At last he put his face very near to hers, and their eyes met full.

'Happy?' he asked, with both his arms round her.

With an effort she brought herself to kiss his cheek uninvited, abandoned to her happiness. Moggerson's arms suddenly tightened.

'My God!' she heard him mutter.

IV

They went slowly on, with his arm across her, and Mabel's, after a slight hesitation, round his waist. In daylight, she could not have done it; but in the darkness, with none to see, she could permit herself so pleasant a caress. And she talked, too, once it was all clear and happy. She was trying to make up to him for her cruel doubts and

the bitter upbraidings which she had heaped upon him in that moment of hysteria. And Moggerson, hardly perceptibly, guided her steps, and half-listened to her chatter, and stooped sometimes to kiss her, until her happiness rose and rose, and made her smile in the secrecy of the safe night.

And they went onward, bearing always a little to the left, until they came out upon the road which fringes the southern Heath, and went along Well Walk and down Christchurch Road, in the heart of Hampstead. It was all dark and beautiful, and the church bells rang for evening service, and they spoke in the hushed tones of the newly engaged, still walking with the slow steady swing of lovers, and Mabel could hardly keep herself from trying to say how happy she was, and how confident. They went down again, past the Hampstead station of the London and North Western Railway, and past the road in which the Brights lived, where Roger and Mary were sitting after tea talking about the mistake Roger had made in ordering the wrong-sized paper. Presently they came to a road where all the houses had wrought-iron railings before them, and cheap crinkly white glass door-panes which reflected the rays of the hall light from a hundred facets. Before one of them Moggerson brought Mabel to a stand-still.

'That's where I live,' he said.

Mabel gazed at it with a quick jet of interest.

'Oo,' she commented, in a hushed voice. '*Looks nice.*'

'See up there . . . second floor. That's my room . . .'

Mabel craned her neck.

'Can't see *anything*,' she said. 'What's it like?'

'A . . . It's got a table, and a lookin'-glass over the mantelpiece. And a stuffed canary. I got my gramophone on the chest of drawers. I *can't* tell you.'

'Must be *awfully* nice . . .' she sighed.

'Look here . . .' his voice trembled, and his face was absolutely white with tempestuous passion. 'A . . . why not . . . a . . . why not come and look at it?'

Mabel's scruples were instantly active. Her distrust of

him revived, powerful and excited, and yet with a sort of trembling blur of reckless happiness. It sent her soul out to surrender in a burning mist of undignified yielding and fear of awaking his resentment and anger. She was afraid of losing that new and painfully achieved dominion over him.

‘Oo, I *coon’t*,’ she said, with her own voice hushed and shaking in its weakness. ‘They’d think . . .’

‘Why not?’ he persisted, his arm still about her, pressing her steadily to his side. ‘Not *afraid*, are you? They’re *all* out. . . . Gone to church. Nobody’d know. *There’s* a sport. Just for the fun of it!’ He was trembling with the cold and his demoralized eagerness.

Mabel hesitated, pressing back against his persistent arm. She felt as though she were being carried, fainting, into the arms of temptation, as one in a dream, who cannot move to avert appalling disaster.

‘Oh, but I . . .’

‘First thing I *ask* you!’ he grumbled, the sweat upon his face. ‘You know you want to!’

Somehow they were inside the gate, and his key was in the lock, and the door was closed behind them. Even then, Mabel shrank back, but he had left her free and gone up the stairs. She tried to call him back, to say she couldn’t go, but he did not seem to hear. With her hand drawn back to the door-catch she stood doubtful, her nerves in a quiver of dread; and Moggerson turned on the stair.

‘Come on!’ he cried.

They were engaged! Her heart throbbed; it seemed to beat in her throat. She *could* not! Suddenly she drew herself up and followed him stealthily up the stairway, creeping as though she were indeed his accomplice, afraid now to thwart him or even to appear to question whatever he believed right to be done. Yet she was trembling with the terrible instinctive fear that was too weak to combat her love and her reliance upon her lover.

V

Ted Amerson, decorously walking about the streets of Hampstead on this fine cold night with Miss Fraser, was enjoying himself even more than usual. Miss Fraser was a fine bold girl, whose father had plenty of money and a big house at West Hampstead, where the Jews live. Mr. Fraser desired his daughter's well-being above all other things, and she was denied nothing—even when her inclination led her to amateurish theatricals. In connexion with these, she had met Ted Amerson, and, although that might have seemed unnecessary, her tact led her to invite him very seldom to her home. On this evening they were doing what, unbeknown to any member of either family, they had been doing all through the autumn. They were walking together, discussing their hobby. Miss Fraser had described all Miss Pellatt's offences in the matter of crossings, forgetfulnesses, failure to give cues, etc., and Teddy had listened with his eyes admiringly open. Miss Pellatt, it seemed, played a whole scene too slow, would *not* cross behind Miss Fraser, *would* look in front of her when she should address Miss Fraser directly—and in fact, as Miss Fraser explained, 'messed the whole scene up like the booby she was'.

Miss Fraser was not sure what she would do with Teddy in the end. He was a nice boy, she felt, from the depths of her furs; he *understood* what one was getting at, and he was really very handy and obliging. She knew he was, matrimonially, a poor match; but she was a good girl, and she had it in her mind to speak to her father about Ted . . . to see whether, in some City office in which her father had influence, he might not have a better chance than he had in the publishing trade. Miss Fraser was one of those people who believe in influence rather than push. She spoke of knowing 'important people,' by which she meant to suggest people who, by speaking a word in season or by advocating a measure, could actually bring about the

fulfilment of their desire. All her young men cousins had been 'put into something good,' and she knew that none of them was as good a fellow as Ted Amerson. A rather tall, handsome brunette, with a faintly excessive love of jewellery, and a dark eye for the material things of life, Miss Fraser had will and ability. It was, with her, only a question of making up her mind. At present, she had not done this: she did not like Ted's reticence about his home life, and she was conscious of the fact that her father would regard her friend as an undesirable connexion. Yet that gave piquancy to the whole subject. She had no fear of Mr. Fraser's objection, because she knew that, for his own sake, and hers, he would make Ted financially presentable; but she was not yet sure that Ted was worth the trouble. Still, she liked their walks, which were by way of being surprisingly accidental; and she preferred his company to that of her girl friends. When the weather grew too bleak for any intercourse beyond the meetings at rehearsals, she would raise the whole matter and settle it finally with herself. Wealth had been too recently acquired by her family to make Ted's manners jarring; and his manifest admiration was so great that Miss Fraser saw in him a young man of considerable dramatic talent, with the ability to amuse her, and with an appearance and address which equalled her own. She also felt that her personality was the stronger, so that if, as an eminent lady has said, in marriage one personality must dominate, and if married life consists in the discovery of the dominant partner, Miss Fraser had little difficulty in foreseeing the result in her own case. She was thinking, very sagaciously, of these things, when Teddy, walking beside her, gave an exclamation.

'What did you say?' she asked.

'Nothing,' said Teddy. 'Shall we turn back now? I just thought I saw one of my sisters going into a house down that road. But it couldn't have been her.'

VI

When Roger Dennett left Marjorie Road, after parting with Mary, he went straight home, climbing Dartmouth Park Hill, and coming out on Highgate Hill just beside that large Roman Catholic Church which is known irreverently in the neighbourhood as 'Holy Joe's.' Above the golden cross which surmounts the green dome of St. Joseph's Retreat, he saw the rich, distant sky, full of stars; and an electric tramcar was squeaking and grunting its way to the terminus in what is called Highgate Village. The turmoil of the car seemed in some way to emphasize that jarring which Roger often perceived between his dim secret thoughts and the sinister, power-absorbing movement of the sea which formed his life. Splendid, purposeful, and full of enthusiasm as his vision seemed, it was always at war with the ways by which he must escape degradation. The joy of labour was his, but never the splendour of achievement; he was serving for ever, but only for a wage; there was never a freedom to rejoice in. He was always shackled; his dreams were contradicted by his lack of liberty. There could be no liberty in commercial life; it was sure to drag down his noblest endeavour, and make it seem mean and spiritless. And if he never lost heart, that was because he was buoyant, and because he had not yet accepted the slavery which, sooner or later, is the end of the English clerk. The other men at Tremlett & Grove's were trembling in fear of their daily bread; they had no savings; some of them had no relatives and no courage: they would be cast adrift if they were discharged. Nobody knew definitely what happened to discharged clerks; if they thought of the matter—if they *dared* to think of it—they shrugged their shoulders, and said, 'I s'pose they get other jobs'. Some of them certainly did; and these sometimes called round when they were lonely, and expressed disdainful pity for the men who were too deeply entangled to escape. They said, 'The old man goes at five; you bet I'm not long *after*!' or, 'Nothing to *do*! Oh, yes, very

busy ; but the manager's a sport. Not a bit like old Chinny.' The others, those who did not get situations, came perhaps once or twice to borrow a shilling or so ; but they rarely came again, unless they, too, wished to flaunt their newly-reached success before their old mates. And those who never came ? Nobody knew, and nobody would try to wonder, what became of them ; they dropped out of existence. So it was obviously unwise to provoke Chinny beyond a certain point ; a faint show of resistance might be made, so long as the surrender was timely ; but the man who 'went too far' was a fool, and deserved all he got. They could be happy, so long as they contrived on bare wages, so long as they never 'argued the point' ; but if ever they looked for a brief instant into the future they were brought hurriedly back to servitude by their mere economic dependence upon their employer. Mr. Cadman was a despot ; Cinch was his Grand Vizier ; the clerks were something less than free men. Their bodies could not be struck ; and they were not all very sensitive to shouts and the subtleties of instructions ; but they could only make plans for the future on a basis of two weeks' earnings. And since the clerk's problem is largely economic, they gave in without knowing it, and the long days sapped their individuality (if they ever had any) and made them indifferent and eternally timid.

Roger had laughed at the idea when he started ; he had said, 'No man *need* be a slave'. He had seen well-to-do clerks, and he knew that some offices were sure. But these were frequently Civil Service clerks ; or those who had stumbled by good fortune into what are called 'soft jobs' or 'safe billets'. He found that the ordinary, unskilled clerk, earning from a pound a week to two pounds ten shillings a week, was bounded by the necessity for conforming to office rule. He found that the innocent word 'sack,' which is the common slang term for 'dismissal,' chilled the stoutest heart. A man who had special knowledge or training was safer ; but the ordinary clerk, who had no aptitude

for anything on earth except the doing of those things which clever men describe as 'instinctive,' was at the mercy of any bully who could say, 'I could get a thousand men to do your work *at a day's notice*.' Roger had seen the hundreds of replies which one advertisement in general terms produced; and he understood why none of the clerks he knew had any ambition. Their main idea was to keep on. Until *what*, or *when*, he did not know. And in his own case, which was not so serious, he had also to regard the terrible abyss of idleness into which he would be thrown by dismissal—among scrambling, eager, perhaps starving men who demanded only the right to go on living. He never doubted that right; he never doubted that men ought to go on living; but he was conscious of the struggle in that dark abyss, and he feared to discover himself among the others. Of what use was it to see life as a romance, or to take joy in the variety of things that might arise in his day's work? Was it, perhaps, all an illusion? Was everything just a blind competition, with no end in happiness and a lack of economic fear? 'Rubbish!' cried Roger; and continued his way.

If men drifted into fears, and into slavery, they did so because their self-respect was destroyed. So long as they kept their self-respect, the idea on which all personal relations were based, they did not fall. He was not out of the race yet; and he had a stout heart. Directly you thought evil was stronger than good, or ugliness more true than beauty, you began snivelling and went adrift. He had not come to that state yet. There were a thousand brave, pleasant things in his life. There was his own natural curiosity; there was his own sense of what things ought to be; there was his deep unsentimental love for his father, his mother, and Edie—for all that made his home; there was—in fact there was no end to the bright spirit in his life. He could not understand why he had fallen into this melancholy strain. He had never heard of anything so preposterous!

Very clearly, Roger's eyes saw the pale radiance of the evening; and he walked swiftly in the cold air, dreaming.

VII

As the front door opened, Edie came out into the passage and a broad smile lighted up her round, pale face.

'Hello, Mushroom!' Roger cried. 'Not in bed?'

'Don't be ridiculous! I'm as wide awake . . .' She came nearer. 'Don't say anything about it, Roddie. Mother's forgotten! I'm not a *bit* sleepy.'

'Off you go!'

'I thought you were a *gentleman*, Roddie. B'sides, it's such a *little* thing!' She was coaxing.

Roger was inflexible.

'It's all for ——' Before he could say what the object of his sternness was, Edie had fled. She was tired of his old joke about unpleasant things being all for her good. She knew he said it, as it were, within inverted commas, as something which was said frequently in mechanical, soulless households; but there was no virtue in a joke so stale. So she went back to the room in which her mother and father were comfortably sitting, and Roger followed her, as soon as he had removed his overcoat.

They were round the fire, and there was room for Roger between his mother and his sister, for Edie had voluntarily vacated an arm-chair, and taken a stool beside it. As Roger sat down, she leaned her head against his knee, with a funny little caressing movement.

'Silly old thing!' Edie murmured.

'She can hardly keep her eyes open,' Mrs. Dennett remarked. 'But she was so anxious to wait up for you . . .' She looked straight at Roger, wondering innocently why he had been to see the Brights. 'Had Mary any news about Mr. Amerson?' He said, 'No,' and tickled Edie's neck, which led to a friendly thump, and the restoration of her head to his knee.

Roger looked across at his father, who had taken no part in the conversation. Mr. Dennett sat in his own chair, to which wheels had been fitted that he might easily be wheeled from one part of the room to another. His paralysis did not seem to affect him as he sat there, with his fine face in the shadow, and his quizzical eyes watching his daughter with an amused glow in them. Roger could see that his father was enjoying Edie's performance very quietly, with a complete understanding; and his heart warmed. Mr. Dennett saw everything so quietly, so much without committing himself to any definite attitude, that many people misunderstood his humour, and thought that it was peculiar in him to show no feeling; yet nothing escaped his eye, and he was as much in the spirit of Edie's affection as he was in the spirit of the literature which was his chief delight. The deep furrows in his forehead were plain; but the curious twist in his lips was hidden by a small white moustache and beard. In every aspect he was finely-bred, as sympathetic as a woman, and much more exquisitely poised than any woman Roger had ever seen. He had lost his activity, but he had lost nothing of the beauty of life, even as he grew older, and more reserved and less given to that vice of the aged—self-worship. It was from Mr. Dennett that Roger had inherited his humorous attitude, just as it was from his mother that Roger drew his power for strange, courageous action. Mr. Dennett, with his delicate sense of beauty, and his sense of the eternal contradictions of life, lived very much in a slow world of even, restful contemplation; and he made no demands upon those he met, except for sincerity. He had an air of *quality*, of distinction, which provoked in his son an emotion of far greater permanence than admiration; it was the emotion of confidence, of some subtle understanding that it was as unnecessary as it was futile to pretend anything, since Mr. Dennett was capable of seeing farther into, and more completely round, a set of circumstances, than any man Roger knew. And he was never

feminine: he never made the implicit demand that he should be the sole judge or confessor; Roger might say anything, or leave everything unsaid, or tell as much as he desired, with the full knowledge that no further question would be asked, no conditions exacted, no side issues introduced to emphasize the power which the confidence might arouse. Roger found in nobody else this extraordinary restraint; even his mother wanted at once to act upon what she knew; his father did not want to do anything beyond what he was asked to do, but he was never unwilling to act, if that were demanded of him. While Mrs. Dennett might occasionally be sentimental or impulsive, Mr. Dennett's long experience of the most delicate shades of judgment needed in his work as a critic saved him from pre-judgment or, in its strictest sense, impertinence. He never volunteered an opinion; but he never hesitated if his opinion was asked. And he was never wordy, as he might have been if his perception had been less delicate, or his sympathy less profound. He never spoke of himself. Particularly, he never alluded to himself as 'one'. He held his head a little back, and Roger felt that if his mind was truly behind his eyes, which seems to be the intuitive speculation, as well as the physiological fact, it must lie farther back in his head than the minds of most. Thoughts seemed to flow straight and swift from his brain, and never to fall into a flux, as Roger thought his own must do; but they never came at a gallop, as they do in the case of those mental steeplechasers who are called brilliant. Really, Roger felt, his father was interesting, simply as a study. Mr. Dennett found Roger powerfully interesting in a similar manner. They revered one another.

'I went home with Mary,' Roger said. 'It's a beautiful night.'

'And stars . . .' Edie put in, seriously.

'Exactly. Little eyes, in the skies, watching when the daylight dies.' He gently pulled her hair.

'I expect Septimus Bright—ugly old thing—was there,' pursued Edith.

'On a chair of sickness,' Roger supplemented. 'As evil as can be.'

'Really, Roger? Is it anything serious?' Mrs. Dennett moved quickly.

'Cold, Mother. He was full of gloom. I've never seen him when he wasn't.'

'Different to *you*!' cried Edie, looking up in Roger's face. '*From*, I mean.'

'I think it's time our grammarian went to bed. . . .' Mrs. Dennett held out her hand to Edith, who rose and stood looking down at Roger for an instant before she kissed him.

'Good-night, old serious!' she said. Roger started at her perception, and patted her lingering hand.

It was after only a short absence that Mrs. Dennett, having seen her younger child to bed, returned to the fire-side.

'What is it, Roger?' she asked.

'Something rather rotten. I'm afraid I'm in for trouble at the office. I seem to have made some frightful blunder.' He looked at her frankly, and smiled, to reassure her as to the spirit in which he was taking his misfortune. 'I'll tell you about it to-morrow evening, when I'm sure. No use meeting trouble half-way. What's the old man so quiet about?'

Mr. Dennett shrugged slightly.

'I thought you were taking something badly,' he said. This time, Roger did not start. He knew his father too well, and he was conscious of the fact that the mistake was really of minor importance among the several things that disturbed him that evening.

'Not that,' he said, ingenuously. 'I'm rather sick about two other things, not suited to family consumption. . . .'

There was a moment's silence. Then Mrs. Dennett asked suddenly:—

'I'm very curious to know if Mary and . . . *Miss* Bright are good friends.'

Roger did not start; but Mr. Dennett saw his eyelids quiver suddenly. Mrs. Dennett only saw him smile a little thoughtfully.

'I never thought of that,' Roger said, at last. 'I should think they *weren't*.' His smile deepened. 'I don't think Viola could like Mary much. In fact, I don't quite see Mary in the galley at all. That's most awfully interesting, Mother. Yes, that's . . . *I* can't tell, of course. I was too agitated about the catastrophe.'

He leant forward to the fire, and his face was grave again.

'You needn't worry about *that*,' put in Mr. Dennett. 'You're unlikely to collapse at any time.' Roger felt definitely what lay in his father's mind. It was plain that his father had no fear; and he was made instantly unafraid. And his mother, on her own account, had brought relief in another quarter. Just as his father had seen the need for complete self-reliance, which at no time previously had ever trembled; so his mother, obsessed strangely with an idea of intimate relationships, had suddenly opened a path to clarification.

'Golly!' Roger muttered to himself. Ten minutes at home by the fire had restored his equanimity, and brought him clear of his confused, stumbling thoughts of resentment. What an instinct these perilous old people had for main issues! Yet, when he came to think of it, what had they said? His father had simply expressed the same feeling as that which Mary had laboured to convey—a belief in his power to extricate himself from any difficulty. And his mother . . . There was nothing in what she had said. Was there nothing? There happened, in this instance, to be everything. For when Viola challenged the comparison between herself and Mary she had not foreseen that Roger, before the evening was fairly started, would demand sympathy; and Mary had been so unconscious of any com-

parison between the two of them, that it actually required the clear vision, and the almost abrupt inquiry of Mrs. Dennett to make Roger test Viola by the quality of Mary's nature. He had been angry, and hurt; but he had not seen that Viola revealed herself by her behaviour. He had thought her unfair; but he had not pushed his inquiry farther. Perhaps, but for the question, he might not have done so. But, suddenly, Viola and Mary were thrown abruptly into contrast. Whatever the outcome of his subsequent reflections, Roger had certainly been cured of his pre-occupation with the surface problem—which was that of his own pride.

VIII

It is customary, in most suburban bedrooms, to barricade the window with a dressing-table, a looking-glass, and an array of curtains. This rule was not followed in Roger Dennett's room, because he would have felt that one might, with less inconvenience, put iron bars to obstruct the free view of the occupant. Roger's window was slightly decorated with casement curtains, and his dressing-table was set endways to the light, so that he could shave in comfort. But the passage to the window was always open; he could go straight to it and look out upon such unencumbered ground as the builders had permitted. His first impulse, on reaching his room that night, was to draw the curtains back, and look out over the garden, and the gardens of the neighbours. From the open window he caught the chill air, and filled his lungs with it, while his eyes strove to make known to him all the contents of the garden. He was not thinking at all of the bushes, of the dying dahlias and the blooming chrysanthemums; he was thinking of Viola. He remembered her at the party, at dinner alone with him, at the concert, at home; he remembered the things he had noticed in her behaviour from the time of their first meeting; and he strove to see her clearly. It was not alone her voice that he heard; it was not her

changing expression that he saw: he was conscious of her extraordinary power of adapting herself to circumstances, and of the abrupt failure of that power. Her delicate, slim figure was clear before him in its daring striped gown; and he smiled at the recollection. There was a hardness, a gentleness, a vulgarity, and a shrewdness in Viola that bewildered him. He could not understand her. She seemed always firm, even when she yielded; and that provoked his admiration. It dawned upon him that she always had her own way with him . . . and that seemed, very faintly, amusing, since he was not conscious of weakness. He could see that she had steadily increased her influence from their first meeting—yet it had been she who turned away. Well, what did she think, or want? He stood, with his hands in his pockets, looking out of the window. To Roger, she was an enigma, and of course she was, proportionately, fascinating, since there is a quality in the will o' the wisp that is refused to the brightest light burning steadily through the winds of earth. He could not see that she had stepped out of her depth with him. He could not see that she had been betrayed out of her sure understanding of herself. He could not know what her feeling at this moment was. A sudden wind stirred the trees and made him shiver; and he turned back to his room, and commenced to undress. Once or twice he sighed; but his brain was conjecturing slowly, almost without agitation.

IX

Upon the discovery that his father was dead, Tom Amerson ran at once for the doctor, who lived at the end of the road; Mrs. Amerson fell into a chair, and began to cry, uttering incoherent speeches; and Mary swayed back against the wall. Only Grace had the strength of mind to go forward and look down at the dead man; and then, seeing that Mary was fainting, she turned, and, with a strange kindness, gave her attention to her sister. A terrible chill

seemed to have fallen upon them all. They did not look at each other, but stared away in helplessness and a sense of dumb shock, hearing the seconds tick very loudly, and waiting for the doctor. There was no doubt, even before the doctor came; and his coolness seemed to give them greater ease. Grace and Mary stood by with Tom, to know what they should do, listening to the doctor's instructions. 'Get *them* out of it,' he said, briefly, indicating the older women. Tom easily persuaded Mrs. Amerson to go; but their grandmother slipped back again to the bedside without a word, in spite of all their endeavours to lead her away. Mary was openly crying when at last she persuaded Gran'ma to come to the fire; but that awoke Gran'ma from her stupor, and she took Mary's hands into her own and looked into her eyes. 'You *poor* child,' Gran'ma said, very gently. 'Poor Mary . . .'

Ted came in, and turned white when he heard; and Tom spoke to him in a quiet voice. Nothing further could be done now: they must go to bed, and leave further action until the morning.

'Come, Mary, old girl,' Ted said.

Mary went very slowly up the stairs. She passed Mabel's door again, and hesitated whether to go in or not. 'I'd better not, . . .' she thought. Then she opened the door quietly, and looked in. Mabel was lying on the bed, fully dressed, with her face pressed into the pillow. She moved at the slight sound, and turned a little, so that her face was more completely hidden. Mary came farther into the room.

'Mabel!' she cried. 'Are you ill?'

As her hand gently touched Mabel's shoulder she heard a stifled sob.

'My dearie.' Her arms were around Mabel in a sudden agony of fear; and only by some greater strength of feeling did she succeed, in spite of a frantic repulse, in holding Mabel to her. What was it? Could Mabel know about their father? It could not be that. What then could be

the matter? All at once, Mabel put her arms round Mary's neck, and commenced to cry bitterly.

'Oh, don't leave me, don't leave me!' she sobbed. 'Don't leave me.'

They were in the darkness, but there was a pale light in the room, from the stars and the light sky; and Mary put her own cheek against Mabel's with the feeling that there was nothing in life but grief. She could not think; she could do no more than give the sympathy that was demanded of her; but she lay awake, stiff and cramped, even when Mabel had at last ceased to make little moaning sounds, and when the slow, frightening sobs, which shook her body and strangled her breath, had died away. Mary's numbed brain could not act; her thoughts went round and round the fact that her father was dead: she had the feeling that everything had become a dull, soundless horror, more terrifying than ordinary silence; as though she was in some strange void, in which even the wind passed endlessly, without noise. Oh, would not something come to put an end to it all? Mabel stirred in her arms, murmuring. There was never an end, except death. . . .

CHAPTER XIII

THE ODD TRICK

I

VIOLA reached the breakfast-room cool and collected; nobody could have guessed from her manner or her appearance that she had slept badly. She seemed always the same, unvarying in her regulated moods. To her surprise, Septimus was standing, fully dressed, looking out into the garden, which was the merest slab of green lawn, surrounded by withered ghosts of perennials.

‘You going to the office?’ she demanded. ‘You’ll be sorry for it.’

‘I’m all right,’ he said, morosely. ‘I’m going.’

‘You’ll catch worse cold.’

‘I’m going.’ She shrugged her shoulders, and commenced to hum.

‘Self-willed little boys suffer for their tricks,’ she observed bitingly, but in general terms. ‘No business of *mine*, of course, if they’re laid up.’

‘No, it’s *not*!’

‘H’n. Sulky, too. Any post?’ She sat down, and the girl brought in eternal bacon and eggs. They did not notice that the meal never altered: any feeling of surprise had long been pressed out of them by a mountain of bacon and eggs. ‘Burnt again!’ She sneered at the girl’s handiwork, casting an inquisitorial eye over the table.

Septimus returned no answer, but made a pretence of eating. Viola also was not hungry. She yawned slightly, raising a slim hand so that it covered her lower lip. Why’s he going? she was thinking, with her brows drawn.

‘For God’s sake, don’t stare,’ he cried, irritably.

‘In a choice temper, aren’t you? Far better stay in bed. Agatha’s taking it easy, I suppose.’ Septimus stirred the tea which she had poured out. His eyes were glowing; and he sniffed. His head ached. But he held in his heart a resolve, and in his hand the trump ace; and he was going to do his best to use the power he had against Roger. He was brooding on his best course of action, so as to use the card to the best advantage, and get in before Roger could establish himself by a rapid inquiry and disclosure. He had waited patiently, knowing that one day he could beat Roger; he had told himself that the man who laughed best was the man who laughed in secret. It was all a question of the right trick. Roger probably thought that by cutting in and telling Cadman—making some sort of capital out of any excuse he could drag up from his ingenuity—before Cadman found out for himself, he could escape with a reprimand. Well, Septimus was going to prevent that. Dennett would get down early, turn up the order, hang about excitedly until Cadman came, run in with his grinning face schooled to mock solemnity, tell his tale. . . . Septimus saw it all. Cadman would whistle, and swear, and cluck his tongue, and frown; and Dennett would swagger out to ask the stationers to put the waste paper into stock, to be carried forward to a future account, to be used up in smaller quantities, as occasion served. It might be cut down, so as to reduce the loss to a few pounds. The off-cuts would be used for prospectuses. Septimus knew exactly what *might* happen.

‘God, I’ve got him!’ he muttered. If he could get at Cinch first, delay Dennett, let Cinch tell the tale. . . . Dennett would be dished. ‘Master Roger Dennett!’ Too ghastly sure of himself! He wondered what Mary would think *then*! Septimus’s lip drew back, and his cold combined with his mood to make his rapidly-drawn breath a hiss. Yes, Mary would find that Dennett wasn’t such a neat gamester after all! She’d learn a bit. Do her good!

But he mustn't show that he'd had anything to do with it! That would never do. He must be very careful. . . . Dennett was the sort of chap who would spin a yarn to her, pretending that he didn't want to make any trouble, or set himself up as better than anybody else. But what a chance! He'd got him as safe as a moth in his fingers.

Viola, looking at Septimus, wondered still what he was thinking about. She did not know very much about Tremlett & Grove's, and even while she guessed that he might be meaning mischief for Roger, she did not guess what it was that was in his mind. They made their breakfast in silence; and Septimus hurried away while Viola was making wry faces over the blackened toast, and sweetening it with a second cup of tea.

II

Mr. Cinch was what the Tremlett clerks called 'Mondayish,' which is to say that his liver was ailing. Somehow his wife's Sunday cookery, or possibly his extreme inactivity on Sunday, always affected him evilly; and his subordinates suffered the consequences. When he caught sight of Septimus he was poring over an invoice which had been returned from America.

'Oh, *you're* back,' he cried, snappishly. It really seemed that his long chin worked in the same way as the chins of ventriloquists' dummies. Before now, Jerdow had called him 'Little Joey,' but somehow the name had not appealed to the other clerks, because it was too allusive. They preferred 'Chin-Chin'. 'Well, look here, Bright . . . either you're a fool, or somebody else is . . .'

Bright went nearer, and put his face next to that of the manager.

'Lively lookin' pair,' Jerdow whispered to Person. 'Like a mute and a chimpanzee.'

'Yes, sir,' Bright said, very quickly. 'Some mistake?'

'You've invoiced this at one-and-eight. Should be *two*-and-eight. Only a trifle.'

'Oh . . . ' Bright said; and Jerdow, watching him cruelly, saw his under-lip protrude. 'Not mine, I think.'

'It's your invoicing. . . . Where'd you get the instructions?'

'Dennett, sir,' said Septimus, and a tinge of colour came into his cheeks.

Cinch clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, and breathed deeply.

'So *that's* it!' he said. 'Good heavens! The muddles in this place!'

'I can only do what I'm told,' Septimus urged. He looked at Cinch—in precisely the best mood for his plan, and already incensed. . . .

'Did you keep his note?' Cinch demanded.

'I'll see. A . . . Mr. Cinch . . . It's not my . . . I hardly like to say anything . . . But there's something I think you should know. Very likely Dennett can explain it . . . '

'Yes, yes,' Cinch cried, impatient but secret, directing his sharp, colourless eyes at Septimus.

'Well, I . . . I happened to hear—quite by accident. . . . We're doing a book on Portrait Painters. . . . Dennett's ordered the wrong paper. He's very cut up about it, I know. I wondered if you could . . . put in a word for him with Mr. Cadman.'

'What! I can't put in words.' When Cinch was savage, as he was now, his mouth shut as though it was fastened.

Septimus kept his eyes low, and Jerdow watched him still. Jerdow found Septimus the most interesting thing in the office. 'Making trouble for somebody,' he was thinking. 'Muddy sneak, he is!'

'Well, of course, it's a very serious mistake,' Septimus said. 'I oughtn't to have said anything about it. . . . It's not *my* business. . . . '

'Oughtn't!' gasped Cinch. 'Nonsense. We can't have any underhand tricks in this place. Serious! Why, it's enough to get him the ——' He checked himself, remem-

bering that Bright was only a clerk. 'That'll do, Bright. You were quite right to tell me. . . . Just look up that note for the invoice.'

Septimus went back to his desk, and searched. Jerdow looked steadily over his shoulder, until he could hardly breathe for the stifling contact of his high collar with his windpipe. Jerdow saw Bright give a start, and a sudden look round, as though he was afraid. He saw Bright disengage a piece of paper furtively from a clip full of papers of various sizes. Slipping off his stool, Jerdow quietly approached Bright.

'I say,' he said suddenly. Bright frantically pushed the slip under his blotting-pad.

'Yes, what is it? What is it?' cried Septimus, breathlessly.

'Sh, sh, sh. . . . Not like that, Bright-eyes!' said Jerdow. 'What d'ye make of this name?' It was not really undecipherable, as he pretended. It was the name 'Farquharson' written with a stale quill.

'Can you find that, Bright?' called Cinch.

'No, sir!' Bright said, white to the lips.

'Come here!'

Septimus hesitated for a moment. Then, pushing Jerdow aside, he went to the manager's desk. Jerdow flicked the slip from under the blotting-pad, and read it before pressing the paper into his waistcoat pocket. 'Mr. Bright,' it read. 'Please charge 520/500 *Carrotty-crop* to the Abraham Motterpop Company, 84 Thirty-sixth Street, N.Y., sheets folded and collated. 2/8. Usual terms. R. D.'

III

Early as Roger was in arriving at the office, he was not in time to prevent Septimus Bright's plans being furthered. Mr. Cadman often came very early in the morning, during the busy season, so that there should be no delay in getting the orders through, and putting in hand the work of the day. And as soon as he came, Cinch was upon him.

'See this invoice. . . . You gave it to me on Saturday,' Cinch said.

'A . . . Motterpops. . . . Yes. Who's the withered fool who made the mistake?'

Cinch paused for the smallest part of a second before he replied.

'Dennett, of course,' he said.

Cadman was nettled. He liked Roger, and he did not care to hear him condemned.

'Don't talk rot, Cinch,' he said, 'No, "of course" about it. It's unfortunate. I'll talk to Dennett.' A part of Cinch's distaste for Roger was due to the fact that Roger's work was outside his control. He was also resentful of the way in which Roger, a new-comer and a junior, had been, as it were, co-opted to the inner council of the firm. Before, Cadman had confided all to Cinch, and they had sung duets in depreciation of Agg, and of various unsuccessful authors. Now, Cinch was being more and more confined to the commercial side of the business (for which he had a greater aptitude), and he had to ransack the letter-book each morning to keep himself abreast of the firm's activities.

'Very well,' he said; and was silent. Cadman passed on. Cinch smiled slowly to himself, in prospective enjoyment.

When Roger arrived at the office, he went at once to the shelf on which he kept the paper-order book. It was not there. The absence of the book sent a thrill through his veins, and he braced himself. It had been taken away. By whom? And for what purpose? Was Cadman there? Of course, it couldn't have been taken for any reason connected with his own anxiety. Somebody must have had it in order that an account might be checked. It was annoying, because it delayed him. Roger stood for a moment, still in his hat and overcoat, looking at his untidy room, and at the newspaper which he had thrown down upon the desk. He could do nothing for a few minutes: but then

he would go and ask about the book. It should not be taken away like this. It was his book, in his care : he was responsible for the orders it contained.

‘Why can’t they let things *alone*!’ he exclaimed; and took off his overcoat. Somehow he was uncomfortable: he felt as though he had had no breakfast, for a leaden weight seemed upon his stomach, such as he had felt when first he went to school, and when he went to business for the first time. ‘It makes me so mad when people interfere!’ That the book should be taken *this* morning, of all mornings! Pity! He stamped about the tiny room, knocking aside the fragile waste-paper basket. Then, preoccupied and apprehensive, he began mechanically to sort out the papers which lay on his desk. A moment later he set them down again, swearing to himself. It was curious that he should be so dull. . . . He was not afraid—that is to say, he was not in fear of consequences to himself. He was simply afraid of dishonour, however slight. A mistake was criminal, and punishable; but he was ready to take blame, and to acknowledge a fault. He hated the uncertainty. If he was sure he was wrong, then he would go straight in and face the music. It was the horrible uncertainty of it all; the unnerving sense that even now he might have been forestalled. . . . Irritably, he sat down, and jerked his chair along the carpet, knocking his knee against his desk. Quite against habit, he swore again at the accident, rubbing his knee. Still, it gave him something to think of for a few seconds. His mind came steadily through again to the missing order book. Where *was* it? He couldn’t stand it any longer. He must ——

Jerdow came into the room.

‘Jolly old row going on inside,’ Jerdow said. ‘Cinch standing in there. . . . Both of them looking at each other as black as thunder. I went in just now . . . Cinch just said “Get out!” I say, d’you know Amerson hasn’t turned up. I just took a wire in—may be from him, eh?’

Roger stared at Jerdow as though he could hardly see

him—almost as he would have regarded an interlocutor in the midst of a great din.

‘Eh. . . . No, I don’t know anything about Amerson. Amerson. . . . Perhaps his father’s worse, or something. A row, did you say? D’you know what it’s about?’

‘A . . . about some — some *paper*, I think it was.’

Roger’s heart gave a bound; and his face was instantly white.

‘Paper?’ How had it come out? It *must* be that. What on earth was he to do? The ground was cut from under his feet. Cinch had taken the book. But how had Cinch known? And what was Cinch trying to do? Jerdow stood patiently, and repeated his later remark.

‘By the way. . . . D’you remember telling Bright to charge something to Motterpops, the American folk?’

‘Carrotty-crop?’ Roger asked. ‘Yes. Why?’

‘He’s charged it wrong.’

‘Well?’

‘I think he’s been blaming you. It’s *his* mistake. I happen to *know*. If you’re asked. See? I’ve got the proof in my pocket.’ Jerdow smiled impishly at Roger’s face, and disappeared.

Yes, but about the paper! Roger saw . . . Was it Bright? Was that what he had meant? Had Bright enlisted Cinch? And, if so, what would Cinch make of it? What was he saying about it? How had he started to explain the thing to Cadman?

Cinch, to be exact, had walked deliberately over to Cadman’s desk with the paper-order book open at the right page (which had been carefully indexed by Roger). With his finger on the page, and with his voice betraying the slightest dry satisfaction with his own power to read character and, by legitimate means, to illumine it, Cinch had said: ‘*Dennett again!*’

IV

'What paper's this?' asked Cadman. 'Some horrible mess-up?' He glanced sharply from the page to Cinch's sandy face and head. It was then that Jerdow brought in the telegram and received such unusual orders from Cinch. Cadman tore open the telegram. 'Hullo, Amerson's father's dead. Poor devil! Now, hurry up, Cinch. What is it you've got to say?'

'I've been showing you that Dennett's getting careless,' Cinch said.

Cadman blinked at the damning order before him; and stroked his hanging moustache.

'I'll have Dennett in,' he said.

'He's putting on a lot of side, you know,' complained Cinch. 'Of course, I'm sorry he's a fool; but business is business.'

'Ah. You're really fond of Dennett, Cinch. You'd be sorry to part with him.'

'No,' Cinch snapped, moving about. 'I've got no time to let personal preferences influence me.' Cadman sat looking at the order.

'Damn. All this time lost. It's *too bad* of him!' he exclaimed.

'And the money, too,' Cinch said. They exchanged a glance.

'How are the orders? I've got McPherson coming in at eleven. I shall want his agreement got at. He's gone to Daggett. . . . These shysters! I must see what we paid him before. Have the sales of his last two books looked up. . . . Daggett won't give us an inch. These bally agents are ruining the relations of publisher and author. Grasp-ing, mercenary dogs! Ask Miss What's-name to look 'em up.'

Cinch went quietly away, well pleased. In the ordinary way Dennett would see to a thing of that sort. Oh

well, he was sorry. . . . He looked at the closed door of Roger's room as he passed.

When he was left alone, Cadman went across and gazed earnestly at a picture which hung on the wall. Then he came back and stared solemnly down at the order, and at Roger's neat handwriting. He found himself approving the shape of the capital 'P' in the order. 'P' he thought, was a letter that beat most people: like a stork on one leg, nothing solid to stand on, and all to one side. 'F' was a bad letter, too, for the same reason. . . . He shook his head, and sighed. It was a bad mistake. Careless little devil. Couldn't have that sort of thing, eh? It was a pity; he liked Dennett; he found him very useful. . . . Yes, but what about all these mistakes he was making? The fact that he *seemed* smart was beside the point. The point *was* that a fellow of Dennett's age must *be* smart. Suddenly a feeling of not quite sincere tumultuous rage seized him, grotesquely, and he flung the order book to the ground.

'Is there *nobody* who can carry out my orders!' he cried. In a moment he was quite quiet again, walking about the room with his hands behind him. 'I'm afraid he'll have to go,' Cadman muttered. 'I can't pass over a thing of this sort. It's damnably careless.'

Just as he was about to call Roger, the door opened, and Roger himself appeared. His face seemed pale, and his eyes had that peculiar steadiness in them which comes to the honest man in a plight.

'Has Mr. Cinch been speaking about "Portrait Painters"?' he asked abruptly.

Cadman stooped and picked up the order book; and looked sternly at Roger.

'Yes. It won't do, Dennett.'

'I know. It's awful. I'm very, very sorry. I saw Joyce last night, and he mentioned the size quite casually. I felt at once there was some mistake; but I haven't been able to see the order.'

'I've seen that,' Cadman said. 'It won't do, Dennett.'

'Of course, it's frightful. I must have been crazy. . . . I'm really ashamed. But that doesn't make it any better.'

'I can't think what's *come* to you. . . . See, here's *another* thing.'

'Motterpop's invoice? Oh, that's not my fault.'

'Cinch says it is.'

'May I call Jerdow? He came in to me just now and said he'd got proof that it wasn't my fault. Perhaps you'd rather not see him?' Roger was so determined not to make a scene that he was speaking rather brusquely.

'Bring him in,' Cadman said. The slip was produced. 'Where'd you get this?' He addressed Jerdow.

'Bright's desk, sir.'

'What were you doing there?'

Jerdow's voice sank to a mumble, as though he had something to hide.

'Nothing, sir. I'd . . . I'd been to ask Bright something; and I saw it.'

'D'you mean that Bright put the blame on to somebody else?'

'Yessir.' Jerdow went away with humbled head. Outside the door he performed something resembling a rapturous modern mesmeric dance.

'Well, *that's* settled,' Cadman said, grimly. 'D'you suggest there's something of the same sort about the paper?'

'No. That's my own mistake.' Roger felt that his mouth was dry, and that his lips were too stiff to form the words clearly.

'Well, what are you going to do about it?'

'I suppose I'm going to do what you decide,' Roger said defiantly. He *hated* to be played with.

'Come, come . . . That's not the sort of tone, my boy.' Cadman looked with a sort of cynical deliberateness at his secretary. 'I tell you frankly—I'm sorry this has happened. I've trusted you. I thought you'd suit me, but you see I can't think that now, eh?'

'It's a serious mistake, Mr. Cadman. It's carelessness, and I'm sorry. I haven't tried to excuse it, because I think it's inexcusable. Otherwise, I don't think I've let you down in anything.'

'But, good God, man. . . . Why *don't* you defend yourself? That's what you're here for!' Cadman was so exasperated that he began to stride about the room.

'I wanted to tell you myself. I could have suggested that we ask the people who made it to keep it in stock. But, particularly now, I can't *explain* anything. The mistake is made. It's for you to decide whether I'm to go, or stay on. I resent Mr. Cinch's having brought it up before I had a chance to do it.'

'Oh, so you resent that. You're talking to me like a schoolmaster, Dennett. . . .' Roger shook his head, distressed. 'Oh yes, you *are*, eh? You think Cinch has got a grudge against you? You think he's got time to waste over your character, eh?'

'No, I don't like Mr. Cinch; but I know he only wants to do what's best for the firm.'

'Oh, you know *that*. . . .' Cadman grew a little sarcastic. 'D'you know, Dennett . . . I've never met a more pig-headed young prig in all my days!' His exasperation was clear, and a faint smile crossed Roger's face, like a shadow.

'I'm just as angry as you are,' Roger said. 'You can't imagine that I'm only looking on it as it affects you. You could afford to lose the paper, or the money. But I can't afford to lose your respect, or my own. It's simply knocked me over. I never knew I could be such a fool.'

Cadman sat heavily down in his chair, and sucked his teeth rudely.

'Take it away,' he said. 'I'm going to make up my mind about you. I may discharge you. You've done yourself no good by talking silly. . . . Eh?'

Roger, when he was back in his own little office, was

shaking like a jelly. He stood for a minute, holding his desk. Then he went back again to Mr. Cadman.

‘Mr. Cadman . . .’ he said; and his voice was unsteady. ‘I wish you’d put me out of my misery now. If I’m to go, tell me. I don’t think I can work unless I know.’

Cadman flushed to the roots of his hair.

‘Well, then, go. . . . And be damned to you!’ he shouted. ‘I’m sick of this precious monkeyin’ about. . . . Keep on like a bally escape of gas!’

V

Ten minutes later, Roger, now as cool as steel, brought Mr. Cadman the McPherson particulars, which he had gathered together on the previous Saturday. Cadman scowled at him like a sulky boy; but said a gruff ‘Thanks’ as he took the particulars from Roger’s hand. Cinch was standing near, watching Roger, who bade him ‘Good-morning’ with admirable ease. Cinch was fingering the Motterpop note.

‘D’you want to see Agg about McPherson?’ Roger asked.

‘Agg? Why did I want to see him?’

‘You wanted to see if McPherson was worth more than he earned.’

‘No man’s worth *that*,’ Cinch interrupted. Roger turned upon him with the shadow of a grin.

‘A man’s worth what he *can* earn,’ he said.

‘Of course . . . we want to keep him.’ Cadman put in. ‘He’s a good man. Eh, Dennett?’

‘Yes.’

‘We gave him three-fifty for the last. . . . And sold just about eight thousand, including Colonial. Well, we can’t lose him. Not many of our people selling that, eh? I see what he wants. Daggett seems to have got him an offer of five hundred from some other withered fools. All right, Dennett . . . I’ll see Agg during the morning.’

Roger closed the door behind him, and Cinch asked suddenly:—

‘Have you spoken to him about that order?’

Cadman turned upon him, and made the longest speech of his life.

‘Look here, Cinch,’ he cried. ‘You’ve got your work to do. You’re a nice fellow—but thin, if I may say so. I’m going to settle with Dennett. I’m going to decide what’s to be done about him. Your job’s with the small fry outside. Dennett’s a good man; he’s a fool, but he’s a good man. Bright’s a fool, and he’s a liar. We’re all fools, more or less. Only some are naturals, and some are rotters. But mark me, Cinch. . . . If you come bleating to me about Dennett for a week, I’ll . . . damned if I won’t look up *your* agreement. I’m tired of this withered tale-bearing and pushing and lying. If a man’s got a complaint, he oughtn’t to sneak about it. I won’t have this business run on those lines. There’s more rotting of staff-loyalty by tales and lies than by any other means. Yes, and you’re the worst of ’em, Cinch. Aren’t you! Eh? You come in here to sneak about Dennett. Why didn’t you go to him direct? You come in first of all with Bright’s lie. Well, that’s shown up. And the fellow ought to be sacked for lying. I’ve got no use for liars in this place. Then, there’s this paper. How did you find out about that? What are you doing with the paper-order book? Why, when I ask for the letter-book in the morning, does that withered girl always say you’ve got it? My God! If I don’t get some sort of order and honesty into this place—and smartness too, I’ll have a wholesale sweep. I will! Mark me, Cinch, I *will* have this tale-bearing checked if I push the fellows out with my own hand and have a lot of boy-messengers to do the work. Go on, and leave that paper there. And send Bright in to me. I’ll talk to him *straight*.’

VI

Roger again reached his room, and sat down at the desk. Although his heart was beating fast and heavily, he was cooler for knowing the worst; and although his face was

white, there was a dogged smile upon his lips. Miss Tender, who had been hovering in the doorway for some moments previously, plunged again into the room at the sound of his step. She was a blonde girl, with much hair piled and extended into a crowning glory; and her puzzled eyes were now distended in clear sign of distress. She breathed out an 'Oh, Mr. Dennett . . .' preparatory to interrupting his meditation.

'Oh, Mr. Dennett!' cried Miss Tender again. 'I was looking for you.'

'That was very ——' Roger began.

'No't wasn't. Old chimpanzee came in just now and said Mr. Cadman wanted some things looked out about Mr. McPherson. What *shall* I do? And oh, Mr. Dennett, he said something about you. And we're so sorry if there's a row. . . .'

'I've given Mr. Cadman the papers. And oh, Miss Tender, what *did* Mr. Cinch say?' Roger turned suavely upon her and noted Miss Tender's bewilderment—her consternation. She came nearer to him, standing near the corner of his desk, very feminine and limp, like a slave.

'He said' (she pronounced it 'sayed,' as a child might have done), 'He said "Master Dennett's over-reached himself *this time!*" He looked so *beastly!*'

'He'd no business to say that,' Roger answered gently and looked up at Miss Tender, whose distended eyes were tearful. 'That's not fair comment. But you needn't worry about McPherson.'

'I'm not!' Miss Tender cried. 'But Mad'line and I thought he meant . . .'

Roger felt a little overpowered by their real kindness, because he knew the miserable girls had their own sufferings at the hands of Cinch. He had even defended them, on occasion, and they were devoted to him, in consequence. He could only laugh at Miss Tender, but the frank avowal of liking for him was as generous as it was pleasant.

'So he *did!*' Roger said.

‘But Mr. Dennett!’

‘In your progress through this life, Miss Tender,’ he proceeded, solemnly. ‘You’ll find that, as somebody said, “there are neither rewards nor punishments; there are consequences”. And . . . in fact, Mr. Cinch can say what he likes, for all I care. But it was kind of you. I *mean* that. And off, off to work!’ He dismissed her airily, and Miss Tender, still puzzled, drifted again from the room, to talk in hushed emphatics with Miss Virks. Such a blow had not fallen upon them for years. It was as though the firm land had suddenly given crumblingly beneath their feet. They, who rarely touched first-hand sensation at all, getting all their life from the library and from a pallid travesty of sentimental novels, came to a point of existence at which both felt a clear original emotion. They had not surrendered their hearts to Roger—such surrender would be made otherwise, in moonlight, or during a dance, or because ‘somebody’ had determined that they should do so. What they had done was unconsciously to take him into their lives. They saw him at the office, where girls and young men see each other rather shorn of bravery; and they knew that they could depend upon his word and his good temper. They were both sentimental girls, graduates from a commercial training college, still forced to spend long-minutes helping each other to decipher strange shorthand characters which appeared in their little notebooks. They still wore gowns unsuited to office work, from a pathetic desire to look ‘lady-like.’ They were still simple, incapable, and disarmingly friendly. And Roger was like a little bridge between their own fathomless ignorance and the terrible snapping irritation of incoherent and semi-articulate employers. If Roger left, their days would again become the morass of helplessness and bravado which they had been before his arrival. They knew nothing of the books about which they wrote letters; they did not know the difference between ‘pica’ and ‘quarto’; they were as ignorant as tyros of the simplest phrases used in publish-

ing; and only a sort of wild-eyed shoulder-shrugging had in the old days saved them from despair. Roger was invaluable to them—at least. Before Roger there had been confusion; if Roger went there would be chaos. To Miss Virks and Miss Tender the dismissal of Roger was a disaster so frightful that they could only speak of it in whispers, leaning far across their adjoining desks to condemn the greater powers.

VII

Nobody saw Septimus Bright leave the office; but when he had finished his talk with Cadman he came from the room like a drunken man, lurching along the passage, with his face the colour of porridge. He went mechanically to the place where the coats and hats were kept; took his own, and disappeared into the street. He felt sick and faint, and his head was throbbing so terribly that he groaned as he walked along. A cold rain was falling, and the wind came sweeping up from the ground, taking his breath away. Steadily in his mind was pulsing the thought: 'Dennett, Dennett again. Dennett. . . . Always Dennett.' It seemed to do more than echo steadily; it seemed to grind into him. Over and over again, while he groaned, and while his head and body ached, Roger's name seared and gnawed into his thoughts. There was no longer any passion in him—only a sense of defeat, of bitter overthrow. He knew nothing of what had happened about Roger's mistake; it did not matter to him now whether Roger was dismissed. He had been found out in that hasty, madly conceived lie to cover himself. He no longer had any fierce desire to hurt Roger; his brain seemed to have no room in it for anything but bitter hatred, curbed, broken. If he had met Roger, he would have turned, snarling, away from him: he could not have met Roger's gaze. He had been jealous, envious of him, exasperated at his own failures, full of resentment, of cramped anger; but only now did he hate Roger. He hated him as deep below the surface as the shadowed waters of a

well. His hatred gripped him like a paralysis, it was so strong. And he was shivering and aching; and his head was in a fever, and his hands burning. The raindrops, as cold as ice, mottled his cheeks and made his eyelids tingle until they were fiery. And Septimus, with his teeth chattering, and his mind barely conscious, sat in the Tube train, the name 'Dennett' jolting interminably from the carriage springs, and every bell from the conductors stabbing through him like steel. His eyes were closed, and his lips hung open; and the few passengers in the car looked at him curiously, thinking: 'What's up with the man in the corner?' They did not sit near him, in case it should be something infectious.

CHAPTER XIV

EVEN-HANDED JUSTICE

I

WHEN morning came, Mary was still awake, but Mabel slept, and as the cold grey light gradually advanced farther into the room, and drove the shadows into day, Mary could see the tear-stains upon Mabel's cheeks, and the swollen eyes and drawn mouth. Mary had lost some of her own poignant grief in her concern with her sister, and now Mabel, in spite of disfigurement, looked so pretty, so young, and so gentle, as she lay there, that Mary felt her old love come sweeping back in the first knowledge that something had made Mabel unhappy. She knew that it must be Moggerson. . . . The fact that Mabel was fully dressed for out-of-doors showed that there must have been some meeting. And although Mabel had cried before, she had never before been so obviously wretched. Mary raised herself and looked at the clock, which was not going; and in a moment turned and sat up in bed. She could see the hands of the clock pointing to five minutes past four, as they always did; and she could see the few china ornaments upon the mantelpiece, the picture postcards of Lewis Waller as Monsieur Beaucaire, and George Alexander in morning-dress, and other actors in costume. . . . And at the sight of one of these actors dressed as Charles the Second she remembered the day on which she had announced her engagement to Septimus. It came back so dimly that she felt it had all happened years ago. She could see his eyes, watching, and hear his voice, that seemed as grey as his face, without colour or warmth.

She thought there was nothing in him to love. And at that thought her cheeks grew warm, for she remembered Roger, and trembled. She was still engaged to Septimus. . . .

Mary wondered how Mabel felt about Moggerson—if she really loved him, or if she saw something in him which was not clear to others. He had such a perky, confident face, and came so near when he spoke, that she *could* not like him; somehow he made her feel a little afraid. Of course, she thought, it was very wrong to be prejudiced against him by things of that sort; but she *did* think he was not a very nice man. She sighed a little, and thought how nice it would be if Mabel could marry a really fine strong man—different from Moggerson, different from Septimus, different even from Roger. Somebody very tall and brave, with blue eyes. . . . Why not like Roger? she wondered. It was not that she thought Roger was not good enough, or that she thought there was nobody like him in the world. ‘Perhaps there is,’ she said to herself, half believing it. Somehow there seemed no possibility of getting them into focus. . . . She could not see them both at once. ‘She wouldn’t understand him,’ Mary thought. She didn’t understand him herself. ‘He’s a boy who . . . He’s very honest, and good-tempered; but he’s sudden . . . and wants somebody rather . . . rather sympathetic to know what he feels. He wants somebody to help him; but *he’d* help, too. And he talks a lot of nonsense!’ she said, very motherly in her apologetics. ‘He’s not like us. . . . He’s *quicker* than we are, and more impatient. . . . I believe he’s more honest. We’re not honest. Mother, Grace, Tom, Ted. . . . They’re all so strange. And Mabel . . .’

Mabel was fast asleep, but her lips moved in unspoken words, and she was not still for a moment, for she lay in a position that brought her no rest. Mary bent over her, and smoothed her hair away from her forehead, very gently, with her own eyes dark with pain, and only the thought of Roger to keep her from her mood of despair. It

seemed very cold, and outside the rain was whispering against the window-panes. The bare trees in the garden were drenched, and dripping with silent drops of rain that hung suspended from the branches in rows. Presently it would be time to go downstairs into the other cold rooms, where the blinds were drawn, and where the light was dim. And there were the dirty supper dishes to wash, and fires to be laid and lighted, and breakfast to prepare. And alone in his bedroom her father lay dead. She remembered the terrifying sight of Gran'ma kneeling by the bed, and the way she had felt when she coaxed Gran'ma to the fireside, still stretching tremulous hands out from her side as though she could not understand what they said to her. It was all so cold, and dark, and sad; yet there was Roger, and in spite of her unhappiness Mary's eyes lightened when she thought of him.

II

At last Mabel awoke, and she looked at Mary with dazed eyes for an instant. Then, as her mind slowly asserted itself, she flushed painfully and turned away, covering her face with her arms. Mary bent nearer, and touched her shoulder.

'Dearie, what is it?' she begged. 'Do tell me . . . it'll be a relief to tell me.'

There was no response, and Mary heard the faintest sob as Mabel tried to cower away from her. She moved away, wondering, until Mabel seemed suddenly to turn, so that they held each other close. Mary's cheek was against Mabel's, and she felt the fresh tears, and heard herself murmuring 'My dearie, my dearie,' as though she had been a mother, and as though Mabel, her child, was still afraid to reveal a hurt.

'I can't, I can't,' Mabel panted. 'Oh, Mary, I can't.'

Mary seemed as though she went right outside her knowledge—as though her mind leapt out into the mists of unknown things.

‘What is it he’s *said*?’ she whispered fiercely. ‘Oh, Mabel, what have you *done*?’ Her heart felt as though it had stopped beating, and in one horrible flush of repulsion she would have freed herself from the clinging arms. But the sensation passed as rapidly as it had come; and she held Mabel the more tightly, without speaking. For a moment she was stunned. What *should* she do? What was there she *could* do or say? Her instinct was truer, and she said nothing. She felt only that Mabel needed all her heart; and she had no impulse to give other than love and poignant pity. She did not reflect; she understood.

III

An hour later, Mary wearily released herself, and stood again by the bedside, bending over Mabel. In the daylight, Mabel could not meet her eyes, but kept her lids lowered.

‘Mabel, dear . . . I *must* go downstairs now to get the breakfast,’ Mary said. ‘Something awful happened here last night. You must be as brave as you can. . . .’ She waited for Mabel to understand without being told; but Mabel was thinking of her own affairs, and hardly listening. ‘Mabel, Father’s dead. . . .’

Mabel said nothing; she was still defending herself in imagination. With a long glance, Mary went out of the room, drawing her breath, and biting her lip so that she might not fail in courage. She went slowly down the stairs, creeping, and down into the darkness of the lower floors. In the kitchen the air was very cold, and the ashes of last night’s fire were repulsive. The wall outside the kitchen window was sodden with the rain, and the windows had moisture upon them. Everything seemed indescribably cold and dank. She felt that if she had once stopped working she would sink to the floor, crying; and she began, sobbing, to take the ashes and cinders from the grate. She could not see clearly for the tears that were in her eyes; but the noise of the fire-iron rasping against the cinders

was at first a relief. When the wood was sparkling and hissing with damp, long wisps of smoke escaped from the little round hole in the top of the grate, curling and disappearing in a vain attempt to find an outlet. She leant back, watching them.

‘I *can’t* bear it,’ she said to herself, over and over again. Yet she went blindly on with her work, which she had done for so many days that her hands needed no direction. And presently she heard a soft footstep, and Mabel came into the room, standing in the doorway, half afraid to enter.

‘Let me help,’ she said, in a strange voice. ‘Oh, *yes*! Mary, don’t *you* be cruel to me!’

Mary gave her the knives and forks to take into the dining-room. ‘What dirty *hands* you’ve got!’ Mabel said, in a stupid way, as she took what Mary held. ‘I s’pose it’s the grate. . . .’

A dreadful anger shook Mary, and she turned from Mabel.

‘I *must* conquer it!’ she thought passionately. It came to her that she could never escape from Septimus, that she could never be humble enough to destroy her vain pride. She remembered that the routine of the day would have to be gone through, that there would be a funeral, that they might be poor. . . . And Mabel was back again, feverishly demanding to be given some more work, keeping her eyes averted. Mary could see Mabel’s hands trembling, and the tired droop of her body. There was no sunshine, no one thing to give them confidence or divert their attention from the squalor of the morning. She felt as if they had never known what happiness was like, or beauty . . . as if they had been doomed never again to raise their heads. It was not shame that possessed her, but despair. She had forgotten Roger.

IV

The others came one by one; first Grace, then Mrs. Amerson, then Teddy and Gran'ma, and lastly, Tom, who had been studying 'Every Man His Own Lawyer' in this emergency. They were all very subdued, and only Mrs. Amerson spoke at all, saying 'Oh dear!' as she had been doing most of the night. Gran'ma was quite silent; but she looked steadily at their faces, and kept slowly shaking her head, as though she were thinking that none of them understood as she understood. Only to Mary did she put out her thin, trembling hand, holding Mary's hand quietly for an instant, and seeing deep into her troubled eyes.

'Oh, Mother, *do* leave off saying "Oh dear"; it doesn't make it any better!' Grace cried at last, in a nervous temper. 'I know . . . We all feel it . . .' She tried to disclaim her irritation.

'Don't you think it would be in better taste if you kept quiet yourself!' said Tom.

'You none of you *know*,' Gran'ma murmured. 'Not one of you.'

'Well, really, Grandmother!' Tom was again constrained to protest. 'I think I may say that I was most *with* my father. However . . .'

'Oh *do* stop it! We're all as nervous as can be. I only wanted Mother to leave off because it seems so useless and ridiculous to *keep on* saying "Oh dear". It isn't as if it did any good!' Grace moved in her chair, and reached for the cruet. She was especially irritable because she had been looking forward to her wedding, and now she would have to see what Edwin Gower would suggest. She knew what he *ought* to say. She wondered if her mother would 'mind'. It would have to be very quiet—just the family, and perhaps one or two others. . . .

'Be ashamed of yourself, Grace!' cried Mrs. Amerson, in pathetic majesty. '*That* you could be so unfeeling on this morning. You're a heartless girl.'

Still Gran'ma was looking at them sceptically, shaking her head, until Teddy thought she had really developed some nervous affection as the result of the shock. He looked alarmedly across the table at her, and thought she resembled a turkey. He had been thinking: 'Of course, it stashes up "Sweet Lavender". I shall have to give it up. They wouldn't like it: it wouldn't *do*. I wonder if I could keep it quiet. . . .' As the others sat silent under Mrs. Amerson's reproof, his brain went on, thinking about the show, and about Miss Fraser. He remembered their walk together in Hampstead and Gospel Oak.

Mary poured out the coffee, and it was handed round. Gran'ma mutely refused hers, and Mary stopped beside her to coax.

'You really *ought* to have something, Gran,' she said. 'You'll be ill if you don't eat something.'

'I say, Mabel,' called Ted. 'Were you out last night?'

Mabel's white face had passed unnoticed. Mary shook her head at Teddy, with a jealous, protective look in her eyes, trying to tell him not to ask the question. Unable to open her lips, Mabel looked coweringly at him in terror.

'Yes, she was,' Grace said. 'Why?'

'Teddy!' Mary cried.

'Why, I thought I saw her in Kandahar Road,' he explained, looking wonderingly at Mary because of her interruption. 'Going into a house. . . .'

'Kandahar Road? Who lives *there*? ' It was Grace who spoke; but Mabel had risen, gasping, from the table, and was beyond the door before the words were uttered. 'How extraordinary!' Grace went on, and pushed her chair back to go after Mabel.

'No, I will . . . ' Mary cried.

'She must have been there. . . .' Teddy smoothed his hair.

'What does it matter . . . what does it matter? . . . With your father lying upstairs!' Gran'ma said in a voice of reproach.

'One likes to have these things explained. . . .' Tom was very judicial. 'As it happens, I *know* who lives in Kandahar Road. That's what makes it important that we should explain it.'

He stood upright and in his frock-coat suit seemed admirably dignified. His hair was close cropped and showed a fairly large, unremarkable head. His brow was square; his eyes a little close together; his mouth set firm in an air of decision. His chin was bold. To himself, he appeared an adequate example of the young man who succeeds by perseverance and by common sense. To the others, he was now the eldest child, and determined that the authority which he now wielded should be recognized.

'Oh, it's a lot of bother,' Teddy cried, resenting the air of authority. 'Sorry I said anything about it. I never meant to upset her. . . .'

'What *is* it, Tom . . . Teddy?' feebly inquired Mrs. Amerson.

'It was just as well you *did* mention it,' said Tom. 'There's obviously something in it. Moggerson lives in Kandahar Road. How many times has she *been* there?'

'For shame, for shame!' cried Gran'ma. 'Your sister!'

'I never shrink from an unpleasant fact, Grandmother. That's why Mabel must explain. It's obvious that Ted saw her. What time was it?'

'I couldn't be *sure* it was her,' protested the informer. He wished he had responded to Mary's protest. Tom was such an officious fool. 'About seven, I should think. I'm not at all *sure* it was her.'

Tom looked at him with some condescension, holding the back of his chair, and bending slightly forward, with his head back, and his lids lowered—as one may see dolls whose eyelids are affected by their position.

'Clearly it was Mabel,' he said. 'Why did she go out of the room, if it wasn't her?'

'The little fool!' Grace was thinking. 'What on earth has she been doing?' Suddenly a panic seized her. They

couldn't have anything of *that* sort in the family! Edwin wouldn't stand that. . . . He had very strict ideas of the way other people, particularly girls, should behave. Of course, Mabel wouldn't be such a fool. . . . Moggerson had been a mistake from the first. She'd always thought so. He'd got no money; and no prospects of getting any. She'd told her mother that he was a mistake. Oh well, nobody had taken any notice of what *she* said. They must take the consequences. But the consequences must not affect *her*. It never occurred to Grace seriously to suppose that anything was wrong: she only hoped that there would be no talk. There mustn't be any talk . . . in case it got round to the Gowers.

Gran'ma was the only member of the family who was thinking of Jerrard Amerson. Her coffee stood untasted before her, and her plate remained empty. Her eyes seemed quite vacant as she rocked very slowly to and fro, engaged still in recalling the past in a thousand dim memories of her own.

V

In half an hour the feminine half of the Amerson household knew that Mabel had disgraced them on the evening of her father's death. When Grace tried to enter Mabel's room she found that the door had been locked, and was told by Mary, who was inside the room, that she could not come in. But Mrs. Amerson, as one possessed, mounted the upper flight of stairs for the first time for many months, and insisted on being allowed to admit herself.

'What have you been doing, Mabel? What have you been doing?' she cried, in a high, feeble bullying voice. 'Good gracious me, girl, what have you been doing?'

'Mother!' Mary protested, with contempt clear in her eyes at the passion which vulgar people always have for scenes.

'Be quiet, Mary. What have you been doing, Mabel?

I insist. . . . She was like a stale flower newly wired by the vendor, and a metallic harshness in her pliant nature, which Mary had not hitherto known, made its appearance. A horrible faint colour had come into her cheeks, and her eyes gleamed like those of a hunter. Her voice, generally plaintive, became shrill and loud. 'Mabel!' She continued to scold, long after the two girls had lost the power of understanding what she said. Mabel lay in a sort of stupor; and Mary stood erect with trembling lips and quivering nostrils, hearing her mother's voice trail on and on in a shrill crescendo, until Mrs. Amerson, broken by her excitement, with the tears bursting from her eyes, began to dab a solid ball of handkerchief to her nose, breathless, vehement, and noisy. Then Mary began to speak, in a trembling voice, hoarse and incoherent.

'Mother . . . It's abominably cruel to talk like that. She can't understand what you're saying. I can't understand you myself. She's very ill . . . and instead of sympathizing with her you're simply bullying her and making her more ill. If, as you say, she disgraced us, whose fault is it? You don't know—it's your fault, and ours, not hers. You've always been strict with us in little ways, and careless in big. You never looked after us, never thought about us, except to keep us at home, and working hard. You've never bothered to wonder if we were happy or getting along all right. . . . You can only blame Mabel *afterwards*, when it's no good. That's not the way. You've never bothered to see that we had friends, or allowed us to make them; you've only wanted to keep us at home . . . adoring *you*, I suppose, for having brought us into the world! Mabel and I have got no friends. . . . We *couldn't* have. You've never let us go anywhere, or see anything. We've had to take what we could get. Simply because you didn't *care*. You never cared *what* Mabel was doing; you thought he was a good man; it was your place to warn Mabel against him if he was bad. Somebody older than Mabel ought to have seen what was wrong with him. She's

weak, but she's not wicked, as you're saying she is. It's absurd to say she's wicked. If she was wicked she'd be brazen. . . .'

Mrs. Amerson listened no longer. Like an animal she approached Mary and struck her across the mouth. 'You little *beast*!' she cried venomously, beside herself. 'You'll teach me my duty. . . .'

Full of a frenzied rage she hustled Mary out of the room, and slammed the door and locked it from the inside.

VI

While Mrs. Amerson was condemning Mabel, Ted sent off telegrams to Tremlett's and to Dickertons, explaining his own and Tom's absence from business. Thus it was that Roger Dennett learned, in due time, of Mr. Amerson's death. He was in the typists' room, dictating a letter to Miss Tender, when Cinch came in, looking very embarrassed.

'Seen Bright?' he asked. 'Seems to have gone home. And, I say, Dennett, I want to speak to you. Come into your room.' When they were alone together, he went on. 'You know *old* Amerson's dead, I suppose? We had a wire from Amerson.' He was silent again, and very embarrassed: Cadman's reproof had stung him, and there was perhaps some instinct of self-preservation in his attempt at friendliness. 'I hope you don't think I raised the question of that paper out of unfriendliness, Dennett.'

'No, Mr. Cinch . . . ' Roger was perfectly composed. 'I said as much to Mr. Cadman. I thought you might have let *me* do it.'

'My first impulse ——'

'It can't be helped now. I'm sorry it happened.'

What more they would have said was unknown to both; but the exigencies of business drove them apart, for Cinch was called away, and the philosophic Agg projected himself with irresistible suddenness into the room.

'Morn' Dennett. Morn' Cinch . . . ' he said, and sank

into the visitors' chair, staring at Roger from his quaint goggle eyes, and laughing to himself. 'Such a rag . . . Came up in the train with McPherson. He was talking about this bloomin' firm in a way you ought to have heard. I hear he's doing very well. Short stories, and muck. You're looking blue, Dennett. Got a worm?'

'Blue yourself,' Roger said. 'I'm as happy as a nugget. But I don't mind telling you. I want to tell everybody—to keep my spirits up. I've been sacked for incompetence.'

'Sac—— Rot. You're the only one in the place who knows a book from a . . . brick!'

Roger rather liked that compliment: Mr. Cadman thought that a book should resemble a brick, on hard, harsh paper, with a solid, stolid binding, and brassy lettering on the back.

'It's true,' he said, smiling. 'And there's a woman here says we've had her book for two months, and she's sick with deferred hope.'

'Bet she'll soon be sick with confirmed chagrin,' Agg cried callously. 'What's her name? Pleece . . . Preece . . . *I can't read the name.* What a letter she writes! Women writers are the devil. They're either very amateurish or hyper-professional, like unsuccessful doctors. Where they learn it, one doesn't know. All right: I'll look it up. But first I'll tell Cadman he's a consummate ass.'

'For heaven's sake ——!' began Roger. But Agg was gone, striding into Cadman's room as if he were setting out on a journey. Roger resumed his seat, and tried to work methodically. He could not help smiling at the way in which the firm was receiving the news of his dismissal. It made him a little sentimental, because he valued himself moderately, to find that anybody was even interested beyond the point of polite condolence. Even Cadman had hesitated. 'You were a fool to provoke him,' Roger said to himself, now that he could see the thing coolly. 'What on earth are you going to do, if you leave?' Then he jerked

his head, and thought again that there need never be despair in a young man's heart. And Agg came back, pluming himself on a peculiarly turned address to Cadman on the especial value of Roger's intelligence to the firm. He had used his phrase again, about books and bricks, and Cadman had visibly reddened. It was not clear that Agg had improved Roger's case, but he was well pleased with himself, and recited a version of his speech to Roger.

'He'll think I *asked* you to intercede!'

'No. I told him you were a fool, and as proud as a pig,' Agg declared.

Roger looked at him with glowing eyes.

'Well,' he said, 'I know the difference between a book and *you*!'

VII

When Agg had gone to his work, Roger remembered the Amersons. He was sorry that Mr. Amerson was dead; but only for Mary's sake. He wondered what she would do. He had gathered from Mr. Amerson that he would leave no money; and he knew that there was no possibility of the earnings of the two boys being sufficient to keep the whole family. There were the two boys, three girls, Mrs. Amerson, and the old grandmother—seven all told. There was no chance of their being able to live on three hundred pounds a year—even if that was what Tom and Teddy earned between them. Less than six pounds a week for seven people was out of the question as a means of keeping them in food, clothing, and home. He could see the home being broken up. Grace, he supposed, would marry: if he knew anything of Mabel's young scamp, he would not be able to support a wife for some time. It gave him a distinct pang to think that this event might force Mary into Bright's arms.

'She *couldn't* do it,' he thought. 'She's not made that way.' But he had an uneasy thought of family pressure. There was always family pressure in such a case. They

would say she *ought* to. It would be pointed out as her duty. 'The word "duty,"' said Roger, very emphatically, 'ought to be abolished. Only very vile people use it.' He remembered how Edie had said to him: 'It's my *duty* to love you. Otherwise I should hate you.' And his mother, very gently, had answered: 'Don't be silly, Edie. You don't mean what you say.' He wondered if Mrs. Amerson used the word 'duty' with unction: it seemed probable. Poor old Mary! With nobody to help her! No, that was not true: there were the Dennetts. The chief thing was, what help could they give? It was with a great sigh of relief that Roger remembered how safely he could leave such matters to his mother, who would find the right way to help as though she had been born to that end.

VIII

Mary stood on the landing, staring at the locked door, for several moments, stupefied at her mother's sudden fury. It was useless for her to try to think; something seemed to be whirring in her aching head, which prevented her from thinking. Then, with her hands pressed to her face, she slowly went into her own room, and took down from their pegs her hat and coat. She was saying to herself over and over again, 'I must go, I *must* go . . . I *couldn't* stay. There's nothing to be done. Nothing to be done. . . .'

She descended the stairs very quietly, and, without a backward glance, let herself out at the front door. She walked very quickly, looking straight in front of her, and still murmuring. Several people watched her uncertain steps along the Junction Road; but it was early yet for those who were doing their marketing, and very few people were about. The driver of a three-horse omnibus waved his whip at her, shouting his destination; but she took no notice of him and walked on. Her eyes had the look of dull glass, and her face was white and set, as though she was bent upon a desperate errand. But no conscious resolve was in her mind: she did not know where she was

going: her steps followed a blind instinct. She came to the bottom of Highgate Hill, and the sight of an undertaker's shop at the corner pressed a dim horror into her being. Still she did not stop; but went on, averting her eyes from the workhouse infirmary which disfigures the right-hand side of Highgate Hill, and keeping on past the Whittington stone and St. Joseph's Retreat. Still no determination other than the fierce desire to get away from Marjorie Road affected her. The word in her mind was still the word 'must,' as though she was being driven by a force quite other than her own will. So children go straight to their mothers when they are hurt, in blind understanding and a reliance upon the sympathy which they know will not be denied. But Mary was going away from her home and from her mother. All unconsciously she had loosed the last strand of loyalty that bound her to Marjorie Road and to the way of life she had been reluctantly following. Her endurance was broken: she was in a fever of mind and of body. 'I *couldn't* stay,' she was saying to herself, defensively. 'Oh no, I *really* couldn't stay any longer. It would have killed me to stay.'

When she reached the Dennetts' house she paused for an instant at the gate; but she was carried on in a dream, shuddering with the depth of her abhorrence of the last scene with Mrs. Amerson. She rang the bell, and listened uncomprehendingly to its whizzing ring within the house. Then she saw Edie, with her hair in its curious little bundle; and Edie looked at her from kind round eyes, standing upon her toes to be kissed. Mrs. Dennett came from the door of the breakfast-room, hurrying.

Mary made one step forward, and stood, a forlorn, swaying figure, as pale as cherry-blossom. She could see Mrs. Dennett's clear, gentle face, and the free graciousness of her quick movements; and she stretched out her hands in a sudden softening of her mood.

'I *had* to come,' she ended. 'I *couldn't* stay any longer.' She made a vague indifferent gesture with her hand. 'You know. . . .'

CHAPTER XV

A PHILOSOPHICAL INTERLUDE

I

PERSON had called for Roger, a queer spectacled figure in an aged overcoat, of which the collar was turned up to keep treacherous winds from his throat. A strange crushed hat was upon his head, and thin wisps of hair emerged from within, symbolizing the extraordinary faculty of Person's mind for projecting itself in unexpected interests. Together they made their way round to the Cappadocian Café, a famous resort of those connected with the publishing trade. Here, in a noisy, smoke-laden room on the second floor, amid the clicking of dominoes and the emphatic cries of chess-players, they drank tea and ate peculiar foods. For the Cappadocian Café specialized in nutritive imitations of commonplace foods, and the smoking room was a compromise arranged between Roger and Person. Person did not smoke; in his slow, pale, dignified way he described smoking as a filthy and degrading habit. Roger, who held the smoking-man's view that those who did not smoke were lost souls, condemned the nutritive imitations. But he was willing to absorb them; if Person would consent to eat in a smoke-vitiated atmosphere. Whether their occasional teas were all pleasure, it is impossible to know. Certainly they did not hear all that was said, for both spoke, like deaf people, in low voices.

The Cappadocian Café gave shelter to advertising canvassers, to publishers' clerks, to journalists, to young authors still bursting with opinions upon all phenomena, and to domino-players. The majority played infantile

games of chess; some chess-experts revealed their glooming talents; and the domino-players blamed their partners in fury born of secret threepenny stakes. Their endeavour was to shout first, before the others could begin. They would grow turkey-red, gobbling and shouting, like angry boys, until some amused protest from the chess-players united them in a common resentment.

‘Order, order!’ the chess-players would cry.

The waitresses, heroic, uncomplaining, bore with the ineptitudes of young men who thought fit to disport themselves with pieces of sugar and with the hats of other people. The waitresses sat huddled together on a long stool, and called orders to others, young women half hidden beyond a screened partition; and these farther young women shrilled the orders down a lift. There was a roaring hubble-bubble, such as one hears only when men are together for food or drink—a noise that arises only in public-houses or in smoking-rooms, free, social, and hearty. It was hardly possible to think that outside in the street newsboys were calling, and vehicles passing in a stream of life. The noises within, so cheerful and, in spite of the domino-players, so good-tempered, showed men as they naturally were, grown-up boys, unfettered by the icy and appalling hand of woman, with other grown-up boys. They lived in the present, absorbed in the moment’s doings, and the sight was jolly. Forlorn wives, eager champions of wrongs, patient feminists, patriots, pacifists, and food reformers, all of whom gathered on the other floors of the building, were here forgotten. It was that splendid, healthy scene—an inn, although there was no beer. One can only get beer in London in draughty or suspicious places. The Cappadocian Café gave room to temperate revellers who were not also prigs.

And it was in such a room as this that Roger and Person had their talk upon many things; a talk which cleared Roger’s mind, and which gave Person one more opportunity of expounding his theories of life.

II

It opened inauspiciously enough, Person observing with profound nonchalance:—

‘Christmas will soon be here.’

‘And we shall be Dukes with the best of them,’ Roger said, laughing. ‘Smoking cigars in the street, with the bands on. Funny furry cigars donated by publicans . . . coming undone all the way up, like a spiral of paper. Of course, you don’t know anything about that.’

‘No,’ said Person.

‘Unobservant old rabbit!’

‘There will be drunkenness,’ Person went on. ‘And the police will be brutal, as usual. An awful gluttony and waste of money on interested good-will. . . .’

‘And tired sempstresses slaving for drunken husbands,’ jeered Roger.

‘You *don’t* know anything about it.’

‘My good Person, you’re a virtuous pessimist. A cynic. In fact, a humanitarian. I adore you—respect you. But I wouldn’t have a vegetarian Christmas for the world! You’re a dear old soul; but you’re inhuman. You don’t sympathize with human frailty. . . .’

‘I try to cure it,’ Person said, good-humouredly, peering through his spectacles.

‘The beauty of life, Person, is imperfection.’ Roger became moral in high glee.

‘The beauty of life, dear child,’ Person retorted, ‘is hid from you.’

‘My life’s a dream of beauty . . . of loving-kindness, of sorrow, and pity. All the jolly fun that makes men lovable,’ Roger said. ‘I’m a mystic, Person. You, with your impracticability—you’re an old sausage. *Nut* sausage, of course.’

‘Dennett . . . when will you discover that all these jokes of yours are stale? The veriest fool can jeer. But it takes a man to believe.’

'Superstition!' cried Roger. 'D'you think these people in this room come up here after vegetable food? No! they come for the company of the other men.'

Person shuddered as he looked around him. His eyes travelled to the farthest corners of the room, like slow flashes of steel. It seemed that nothing could ever escape his fine, dignified scrutiny.

'If those are men, . . .' he began.

'Oh, they *are*!' Roger looked back over his shoulder at the gathering, intent on their play.

'They're certainly on your side.' Person could be as coldly contemptuous as an aristocrat. 'They feed and play like savages. You can have them, Dennett.'

'Snob! Spiritual snob! To think you're better than your species!'

'Well,' urged Person, moving a little uneasily. 'Why aren't they at home? That's their proper place. Or, mind you, enjoying themselves in a better fashion.'

'What more intellectual pastime can you have than chess? Haven't all the most brilliant chess-players gone mad because of the intellectual strain? And home! Person. . . . You a humanitarian, a thinker—nay, a notorious *free-thinker*, philosophic defender of a promiscuity you *couldn't* enjoy! You to talk of home!'

Person fixed his unperturbed gaze upon his butterfly opponent.

'Even home is better than bestial pleasures,' he said, with solemnity.

'Poor old dominoes!'

'Home is at least a training in loyalty. It's the world in little. A microcosm!'

Roger's cheeks, as fresh as ever, in spite of his worry, seemed like little apples as they grew plump with laughter. He finished his tea, and drew forth his blackened pipe, grinning across the table in so affectionate a manner that Person smiled.

'You've never had a home,' Roger said, Person clouded.

'I was one of ten,' he said. 'I admit ours was a poor home. I see that homes are really a mistake. One wants fellowship, kinship of ideas. These men have no such perception. They are merely killing time. They are strangers to their families. They're not revolutionaries. They're defaulters.'

'They're *men*,' claimed Roger. 'You philosophers never understand that. You're always making pictures of a life all cut and dried and inhuman—fine picture galleries, and a neat communal life hedged in with conventions. You can't get away from conventions. Every mealtime is a convention. And of course meals are the main business of life. You can't have a social community that isn't based on meals. Every festival that makes life holy is a meal, an excuse for eating and drinking. You think a communal vegetarian kitchen would answer—my good man, just imagine vegetarian and temperance feasts. It's like chapel sociability. It's like the inhumanity of pleasant Sunday afternoons, when every man's got to be treated with an appalling bright brotherliness. . . . Think of the hand-grips!'

'Nonsense!' cried Person. 'Rubbish.'

'It's all a mistake, Person. You think you can do what you can't do. The essence of personal relationship's the idea that we're different from everybody else. If you've got a large family George doesn't love Harry as much as if they were the only ones in the family. Affection is finite. You get your large family, you get a family of strangers. Small families may breed rivalry; but they make for distinct cleavages and personality. That's why I believe in nationality.'

'It's preposterous!' Person interrupted. 'Listen!'

III

Nobody in the room could hear them, for all were engrossed upon their game. The same might have been said of Person and Roger, who hung over the table looking at each other. Person, as usual, was pale—as pale as a pud-

ding, or a turnip, but obviously not unhealthy. His pallor was not that of Moggerson or Bright or Ted Amerson: it was the pallor of refinement and of a studious habit: theirs was as if a thin grey powder overspread their faces. Person, with his round face, and his spectacles, was monstrously serious; they were lean, tired, aged too early. Person had plenty of energy, plenty of blood, but his temperament was as cool as deep water, and he was not sanguine. As Roger looked into Person's face he had a strange thrill of respect. His friend was so obviously one who acted upon his convictions, and even troubled to assay them; and Roger recognized this as such a rare merit in young men that he smiled again, amiably.

'I'm a vegetarian,' Person said, 'and a humanitarian, because I believe it's wrong to destroy life, or to cause pain. I'm not a sentimentalist. I'm trying to be honest, and do what's right; but I hate prigs as much as you do.'

'Hear, hear,' said Roger.

'You, on the other hand, are a sentimentalist,' pursued the philosophic Person. 'You would be in a fever if your own dog was hurt, and you couldn't kill your own beasts for food, because you'd remember all their characteristic doings. You'd have built up your little tower of individuality in each of them. You don't see things largely; you see them in atoms. You see your dog; but you don't see *all* dogs. Very well. . . . I see all dogs, and all men. I see that they're imperfect, and some of them are trying to be perfect. But as soon as they try, as soon as they conquer their purely sensual habits—love of women, and smoking, and risk, and drinking, you call them prigs. Because you're a conventionalist—because you agree that selfishness and self-indulgence, being the lowest and most common things in mankind, are necessarily the truest things in human nature. Nothing of the kind. . . .'

'My *good* Person!' Roger ejaculated.

'The truest things in life are the finest. Virtue is fine for its own sake—virtue in thought, and deed, and char-

acter. Virtue is the one thing that rises pure and straight as a flame. You want fine thought; yet you admit slaughter. Don't you see that every time a thing is killed or hurt, universal virtue is postponed? Every time you eat meat you're growing more used to it, and taking it more for granted that sacrifice must be made to the god of your stomach. Everything you do is affecting your ideal, your idea of life. It's a precious thing . . . Well, then . . . suppose you agree that virtue is worth getting, won't you give up baser things, and pledge yourself to the nobler? If you think men should be too honest to hurt weaker things—because each time a bully uses his strength he's more of a coward than the thing he terrifies—then you ought to go on to other things. You ought to believe that men shouldn't hurt each other. The rule's the same there. For their own sake, and for the sake of everybody alive, they ought to be peace-loving. . . .'

'I object!' Roger cried.

'Wait a minute. . . . If they've got no cause for fighting, if peace and goodwill (you'll hear something about that in a week or two), eh . . .'

'Don't go to church!'

'If peace and goodwill mean growth towards a worthier life, then you'll get peaceful and happy communities. Now, directly you think of communities you touch freedom. You get rid of economic fears when we're all on good terms. I know you think too much about economic inequality—you get men able to meet each other on equal terms. You get rid of the idea of "that's *mine*," or "what we've got we'll hold". You reach a state where there's no need to think every man's hand's against you. You're able to feel kindness to anybody. . . .'

'My dear Person!' jeered Roger, after having made one or two amused attempts to distract his friend from his serious argument.

'*Then*,' Person said, firmly, 'you'll be able to feed comfortably with others. Then you won't think a man's

prying. You won't want to live in the dark with your private vices. Your family will join you, and lead a social life, instead of squabbling secretly, and backbiting, and "throwing things up". As Wordsworth said, you'll "Come forth into the light of things". You won't be afraid of making friends; your family won't live like a clique—bound together to preserve appearances. You'll live a social life without jealousies. And that way you'll get rid of the family stew.'

'Do I understand you believe in marriage—perpetual marriage?' Roger asked.

'Yes. On good eugenic lines,' said Person. 'But not selfish marriage. I should call it union.'

Roger shouted with laughter.

'That wouldn't do in the suburbs,' he remarked.

'Oh, I'd bring the suburbs up to the level of the rest.'

'Up!' Roger exclaimed. 'Why, they're enthroned! No, I know it's out-of-date to curse the suburbs. But really, Person, your knowledge of life is dreadful. You're like all the rest of 'em. You think you're on the right road, and so does everybody else. Mind, yours is worthy. I've got nothing against vegetarianism *qua* vegetarianism. It's sentimental, of course, because you over-value life;—but—be quiet, you ruffian—but it's an idea. . . .'

'My *dear* boy! It's a survival from the great days of the ancient empires!'

'When there were slaves! Well . . .'

'Dennett. . . . What d'you think there are now? Aren't we *all* slaves? Aren't all the poor devils you know clanking with chains? That's the foul mockery of modern liberty . . . the chains are enamelled.'

'All right . . . I agree to that. . . . As I was saying, it's an idea. I'm not a vegetarian, and I never shall be, because ideas have got nothing to do with life—anyway, in our class. If we were independent, we could live as we chose. But we must have our homes. You can't deny us them. Now the reason you humanitarians are all wrong

is because you won't have sacrifice. You'll never give humanitarianism the rank of a religion because you haven't got a positive keystone. What's made the Japanese rise? Sacrifice for the Mikado. What's made the Christian religion great? Sacrifice for Christ. What *d'you* say, now? You say, be good. It's quite a pleasant call. But why be good or bad? You say . . . Be good and kind because you ought to be. Who said so? My dear good Person, Godliness without God is all very well; but it saps . . . it don't build up.'

'Dennett,' said Person. . . . 'You're a fool. . . . I'm sorry to say.'

'Now—to the family. Since you dragged it in. I'm a mystic, as I told you. And I love my father and mother, and little Edie. That's the strongest idea I have. I'll sacrifice myself for my family. That's the only thing I'll sacrifice myself for. . . . At least, at present. They're very fond of me: they believe in me. If you mean to tell me that anybody would believe in anybody . . .'

'That's folly!'

'Not passionately. No, look here, man! You old ruffians always think that because you can live in an hotel, or a camp, and never miss the exquisiteness of the fireside, you're being unselfish. You're not. You've simply got no bump of home-loving. I want men economically equal, all right; but I'd rather have this present state of things, and have some people living happily, and some in hell (like a family I know) than give up my belief in ——' He looked furtively round—'in love and home. It's true. You've never known what it is. I have. That's why I'm happy. I see all the wrong, and I'd like to destroy it. If you, and people like you, want to live in a particular way, I'd let you. But I *won't* have you shackling me with *your* conventions. You shan't force your ideals on me, because I've got my own. But my sweet good Person—don't talk about freedom. Your idea of freedom is making other people do what you think is right for them. You're legislating for

others, like every pitiful politician in the world. You don't want people to be free. You want to impose your conventions on them, because you're sure they'd be happier. It would be like taking water away from fish. I'm going to live as straight as I can, and have a home, and perhaps a family—because that's what I want. That gives me a sense of freedom. You're going to live a bachelor, preaching your mediocre Godliness. And we're going to be friends: and both of us are going to be happy in ourselves. But God knows where the world's going. There are plenty of Reformers; and they're out to make life a hell to ordinary men. But there's not many Revolutionaries alive. A Revolutionary's born, like the rest of us; but he's just an egoist, not a martyr. And a Reformer like you is a weary old creature, who's got a thin flame, and no scorching fire in his breast. Humanitarianism's not revolutionary; it's a sort of morbid common sense. Common sense and water. That's what it is!'

Roger was laughing: at the moment he believed what he said. Person looked at him steadily, and drew a long hand over his own hair, smoothing it down.

'Talk,' he said. 'Talk. You're afraid to move.'

He did not understand Roger's nature any better than Roger understood Person. But they had enjoyed themselves, after a vain fashion; and they were both rather moved. It did not matter about Person, who went home and began to read 'Industrial England in the Middle of the Eighteenth Century'; but it mattered very much to Roger, who reached his father's house at Highgate to find that Mary Amerson was there, too seriously ill to be moved.

CHAPTER XVI

FAMILY AFFAIRS

I

AFTER shivering during the whole of his journey home, Septimus sat by the fireside, with his head aching as though it would burst; and when he coughed a terrible pain jerked through his lung. Agatha made him go to bed; and he lay there, coughing and groaning; until she was forced to send for the doctor. Even then, they hardly recognized how seriously ill he was, but the doctor quickly saw that this was pneumonia, and drove Agatha into nervous agitation by his excessive gravity and mechanical kindliness. She saw Septimus in his coffin in a twinkling; instantly she telegraphed to Viola, who came home at the usual time. Viola, who had been thinking shrewdly, during the day, about her brother's recent conduct, had seen for the first time that she disliked him—that, in spite of some odd family affection, or conventional familiarity with him, she could live very comfortably without seeing Septimus at all. It needed courage to think this; but Viola rarely shirked the outcome of her examinations. That was why, before coming home, she had written from the office a short note to Roger. She had known exactly what to say; the words were all clear in her mind before she put them down. They were as few as possible, and as direct; and she posted the letter on her way home. Roger would get it the following morning. . . . She smiled a little apprehensively after she had dropped the message into the gaping mouth of a district letter-box, because it was so easy, when one had posted a letter, to wonder whether it had

been wise to write it at all. . . . For a moment she loitered, deep in thought; then she caught a sidelong glimpse of herself in the plate-glass window of the post-office, and reassured herself as to the angle at which her hat was set. She was quite serious and quite cool. The letter said:—

‘DEAR ROGER. I want you to come and see me. V. B.’

She wondered if he would come. If he *didn't* come. . . .

‘If he doesn't come,’ she said to herself, ‘he's a coward.’ But she knew he was not a coward; and her secret thought, which was so deep in her mind that she could not have expressed it in words, was: ‘If he doesn't come, he doesn't want me. It's too late.’

II

‘But my dear—what's the child's trouble?’ asked Mr. Dennett, of his wife. He was sitting reading over the fire, and released his mind with difficulty from ‘Le Cousin Pons,’ in order to listen to her explanation. A long finger was left in the book, but he gave her all his attention.

‘Poor girl. She's got enough to trouble her. First her father dies. Then some obscure trouble at home seems to be breaking her heart. Her mother seems to have struck her. And there's always Roger.’

‘Roger? Oh, I see. What's Roger doing?’

‘I'm nearly provoked with him. He's being so silly. Of course, I don't *know* exactly. He's grown careless and unthinking—suddenly. It's quite unlike him; but he seems to be doing everything . . .’ Mrs. Dennett lowered her voice, as she might have done in mentioning a blasphemy . . . ‘*shallowly*. I don't think he understands himself. His mind's always somewhere else, in a dream; and he doesn't realize how cruel he's being.’

‘Perhaps he never will,’ suggested Mr. Dennett.

‘Yes he will. But it may be too late. Mary's thought of him as an ideal being all her life; and instead of living

up to his reputation he's deserted her when he ought to have stayed. He's a silly boy.'

'Well, he's not particularly happy,' Mr. Dennett urged. 'We can see that.'

They exchanged a glance. Mrs. Dennett was standing about a yard from his chair, looking down into the fire, and there was a youthfulness in her face and her figure that was beautiful to see.

'Young people want shepherding,' she announced. 'Everybody's drifting for want of a friendly hand. Yet they're all so impatient of being told. . . .'

'It seems a very pleasant idea. You must remember that reserves are very delightful.'

'They're sometimes very vulgar.'

'I'm not talking about snubs. I'm talking about the things you keep very silently in your mind. All sorts of delightful things. I'm sure you keep them.'

She sighed a little. It was pleasant to think that she could trust everybody near her; she hardly ever met people she could not trust; she even trusted the tradesmen. And Mary was in bed and asleep, with Edie to mount guard. Mrs. Dennett seated herself in a chair at the side of the fire, opposite to her husband.

'I'm talking about a sort of vanity,' she said, naïvely. 'I never knew until now that Roger had any. He's . . . what's that word you use? . . . obsessed with some idea, and it seems to have robbed him of his power to hold everything steady.'

'That's quite temporary,' Mr. Dennett said, his eyes gleaming. 'You must expect that, at his age. I've been similarly placed myself.'

'Oh, but *don't* you understand! I'm afraid that he's perversely in love with this Viola Bright.' Mrs. Dennett looked impulsively at her husband. 'I don't know her; I've got no idea of her: but I feel she's *wrong*, somehow.'

'Isn't it a little conventional?' suggested her husband,

'to put every aberration down to a girl? There are so *many* things besides girls in Roger's life.'

Mrs. Dennett was convulsed with scorn of her husband's theory.

'For one thing, he doesn't speak of her,' she explained. 'For another, he'd never have deserted Mary if there had not been somebody else.'

'Deserted, my dear . . . I *can't* understand. You're so partisan.'

'Partisan!' cried Mrs. Dennett. 'I thought I was being impartial.' It was an instinctive confession. She had been proud of her impartiality. Mr. Dennett condemned her.

'In order to be impartial,' he said, 'you must first become inhuman. Having become inhuman you become entirely unable to judge human conduct. You then adumbrate schemes of social reform. But you don't help anybody. My dear, the very fact that you're an imaginative, sensitive woman makes it impossible that you should be impartial. What you must do is to bring your purely personal influence to bear.'

'But you . . . a critic!'

'I wonder you haven't shaken off *that* superstition,' said Mr. Dennett.

III

So Mabel, too, was deserted in her hour of need; and the Amersons talked together very conflictingly. They were all excited; but Mrs. Amerson wavered between tears and vindictiveness, while Grace and Tom had each one cool steady thought to support them. Tom was aware of the fact that all responsibility was now upon his shoulders; Grace was in a cold fear of her future. They all spoke in hushed voices, and lived in the back rooms of the house, overlooking the sodden, gloomy garden, because the blinds to the front windows were drawn, proclaiming their loss to the world. Teddy wandered aimlessly about the house, having lost his nerve; he felt that nobody understood how

affected he was, but he could hear himself ejaculating: 'Poor old dad'. He even said it while he watched himself in a big looking-glass; there seemed a curious fascination in the sight of his own pale face and his wry lips as he said the words. They took no notice of Gran'ma, who sat with a look of scorn on her face; and as Mary was absent they were forced at one o'clock to have a cold dinner.

At this time came a note from Mrs. Dennett, which explained that the doctor thought Mary should not be moved for the present; and Mrs. Amerson cried at the idea that a daughter of hers should be in the hands of strangers at a crisis of this kind. She was still resentful of Mary's insubordination; but it hurt her vanity that Mary should go away. 'I can't think what's *come* to my girls!' she said, several times, during dinner. 'They don't seem to think of their mother.' She spoke as though she were unhinged, as though her mind, from brooding, had turned only inwards, so that she forgot all except the contemplation of her own forlornness. 'I'm all alone,' she said. They all sat there eating, very dismal and squalid, thinking of themselves.

Tom was the first to rise. He had been writing letters all the morning, telling his aunts and uncles that Jerrard Amerson was dead; and he had still others to prepare. He copied his draft letter word for word in each case; and even when a change in the wording would have been a relief he plodded on, writing the same bald words in his stiff, clear handwriting. 'DEAR UNCLE,' he wrote. 'I am sorry to have to tell you that my dear father died last evening at eleven o'clock. The funeral will take place on Thursday next, from this house, leaving here at twelve o'clock. Please let me know if you wish to be present. My dear father's death has been a great shock to us. My mother is bearing up as well as could be expected, but naturally she is very much upset. Your affectionate nephew, THOMAS J. AMERSON.' Tom thought this letter came best from himself, as the new head of the family.

They were all so preoccupied with their personal problems that they had very little thought to spare for Mabel, who lay upon her bed, sick and ill; and no thought at all to give to absent Mary, who seemed as distant as a cousin.

IV

Soon the question came—what was to be done about Mabel? Grace, who had worked the matter out in her own terms, spoke to Mrs. Amerson.

‘Mother. . . What are we going to do about Mabel?’

‘Don’t talk about that girl!’ cried Mrs. Amerson, with emotion. ‘Ugh!’

‘Well, something *must* be done. If the Gowers heard about it! I’m not going to have my life spoilt because I’ve got a fool of a sister,’ Grace said, impatiently. ‘I suppose Tom will have to see that man. Tom seems to want to manage everything.’ She was standing very restlessly at a small distance, staring out of the window. Her face was very hard: her eyes were hard and shrewd; she was fighting for the one important thing in her life. She did not care about Mabel disgracing herself; she had no speculation for the good of her family. Her man was in question; and she had become primitive.

‘*I can’t I can’t. . . .* You’re . . . I’m not *strong* enough to be worried like this,’ protested Mrs. Amerson. ‘If ever a wife deserved consideration. . . . There *wasn’t* a *thing* I didn’t do for him. Oh, he was a *selfish* man. I *begged* him to think more about me. He simply wanted to go on at the office, instead of coming home. Anybody would think I’d been a bad wife to him. I gave in to him in everything. . . . If I’d been a little more independent, I should have *forced* him to consider me a little.’

‘But *Mabel*, Mother!’ cried Grace, interrupting the rambling monologue. ‘Don’t you see how serious it is? Edwin mustn’t hear a *word* of it. And there you are, keeping on about Father, who’s dead.’ The tears were in

her eyes, and she faltered suddenly. 'I'm sure he wasn't a bad man. You know he *had* to work hard.'

Mrs. Amerson's tired-looking eyes swayed round to a contemplation of her daughter, drearily, as though sight was a lost faculty.

'Nobody ever thinks of what I've gone through,' she said. 'And that girl upstairs! No girl of mine. . . .'

'Oh, Mother, you're *hopeless*!' cried Grace, and went quickly out of the room, with her nerves all on edge. 'That's what it's been all the time,' she was saying to herself. 'One long nag-nag-nag. Never any bother about us. . . . The same old worrying way all the time. I'm *sick* of it.'

V

Tom was still writing his letters when Ted came quickly up to him and suddenly thumped the table with an hysterical gesture.

'I'm just about tired of this bossing!' he cried. 'And you sitting solemnly like a death's head writing all your bally old letters. Good heavens, man. . . . D'you think I'm nobody at all? Anybody would think I was made of plaster, the way you look at me. I want to know what's going on. Absolutely!'

A faint colour came into Tom's face as he half rose, staring his brother down.

'What on earth are you talking about?' he demanded. 'Are you out of your mind?'

'Shut up!' Ted began, savagely. 'Don't come the big dog with me. I tell you, I won't stand it. As though I was a puppy!'

'So you are a puppy!'

'Oh God, oh God. . . . Poor old dad!' Ted exclaimed; and began blubbering like a boy. 'Poor old dad!' He put his hands to his face, and walked about the room in a stricken state. 'And that frozen prig putting on airs before he's dead a day!'

Hysterically he sank down into a chair with wild gestures.

'You're mad,' Tom said, 'I should think you're mad. To talk like that! I never heard of such lunacy. Come talking like that to me.' He too was very much moved, by the attack on himself. 'You ought to have more self-control than to make a scene. It's this damned . . . yes, this damned theatricality.'

Ted regarded him suddenly with a weak effort at contemptuous sneering.

'Hear you talk!' he cried. 'And that poor old chap . . .'

'Well, what's he done?' demanded Tom. 'He's left us without a penny. Not a penny, I tell you. There's only this house, and I don't know how many things to pay. And *I've* got to do it all. Does anybody think *you're* going to do anything? Why, you *can't*! You can barely keep yourself. . . . Let alone help me to set things straight. If Father had done what he ought, he'd have put you out to keep yourself. Then you'd have known.'

'Not another word!' Ted said, dramatically, rising with his arm raised. 'I won't listen to you. Not another word!'

'You're crazy,' cried Tom, and turned to the doorway, through which Grace entered.

VI

The three of them stood silent, and Tom and Grace measured each other in cool hostility, both of them prepared to join forces, in spite of their aversion, for the sake of personal ends to be served. At the threat of a further burst of storm the sky had darkened until the room was in twilight, and the Amersons could not see each other. There was a curious silence until the swishing rain began to pour down in force upon the spattering garden, that was thick with heavy mud. A rolling of thunder was in the air, before the lightning had passed.

'What is it?' demanded Tom.

'I want to know what's going to be done. Mother's evidently not able to do anything.'

'Done about what?'

'Mabel—everything,' Grace said. '*You* seem to be wanting to do everything.'

'That's what *I've* been saying!' cried Ted. 'As if we were ninnies.'

Tom held the back of his chair, and threw his head back, trying to be composed.

'Anybody,' he said, 'would think that what I'm doing is pleasant. I notice that none of you offer any help. You only complain because I'm going on with my work.'

'You want to manage!' interrupted Ted.

'Pardon me, I don't. But I see that you're incapable of doing anything.'

'What are you going to do about Mabel? Good heavens! *Something* must be done. Suppose the Gowers heard!'

Tom shrugged his shoulders.

'Of course,' he said. 'I must see Moggerson. Mabel must tell us exactly what the position is.'—Grace laughed angrily.—'I'm not going to make a fool of myself by going with half a tale.'

'What's it matter to us *what* you do?' cried Ted.

'All this silly bickering only wastes my time. . . . If you haven't got any more to say, I'll finish my letters!' Tom resumed his seat. 'You'd better try and find something to do, Grace.' He successfully ignored Ted, who advanced to the table, and cried suddenly with his voice quite out of control:—

'I shall get out of this place. I've been domineered over long enough, and I won't stand it. I tell you, I shall clear right out . . . after . . . ' With another wild, hysterical cry of 'Poor old dad,' he went stumbling from the room.

'You mustn't let him do that,' Grace said, swiftly. Tom

looked up at her, with the end of his penholder against his mouth.

‘Why not?’ he asked.

‘We shall want every farthing. . . .’ Grace concluded, ‘And don’t you forget it.’

VII

Roger Dennett walked up Highgate Hill from the Tube railway station with his head still buzzing as a result of his day’s excitement. First there had been the scene with Cadman, and the strange quietening effect of knowing that he was discharged. Then the discovery that he would be missed by the staff. Finally, there was his excited talk with Person. It was all exciting and moulding. Somehow he was stronger now that he knew he must seek another situation, and he would not think what difficulties might be in store: he sniffed the air and sped up the hill until he began to pant and to slacken speed unconsciously. A clock at the top of the hill chimed eight, and a tramcar grunted and squealed past him on its downward journey. He entered the house with a sense of breeze and courage that made him feel as though all his cares were past. Even as he took off his overcoat, Edie came running on tip-toe to announce the great news.

‘Oh, Roger! She’s here, and she’s so ill. We’ve had to have the doctor. . . . And he says she’s got to stop here for just now. Isn’t it *awful*!’

It never occurred to Roger to doubt for an instant that this unnamed ‘she’ was Mary. He turned quickly upon Edie, and demanded:—

‘Where *is* she?’ His mind plunged straight into some imagining of Mary helpless. The vision was gone in a minute, and he did not know what Edie had answered. Strange, he thought afterwards, that he should have known. He had been so full of other things that this sudden clear perception was too surprising to explain. He passed into the sitting-room without hearing any more of Edie’s

discourse; but she followed him, and stood talking until he dropped his eyes once again to her face.

‘. . . so I took a little note; and she’s to stay here. We’ll never let her go now, *will* we, Roger!’ Edie said, in conclusion. ‘It’ll be so beautiful to have her with us. . . .’ She looked up at him radiantly, her face all alert with expressive eagerness.

‘Bless my soul!’ Roger was saying, feebly. ‘How you *do* run on, Edie!’

‘Dear old chap!’

‘Edie!’ He protested against her affection and the way she took his arm. ‘This is not *de rigueur*.’

‘But I *felt* it would come . . .’ Edie went on. ‘I just *knew* we were bound to get her. I *hoped* she would be taken ill here one day, so’s she couldn’t ever go home.’

‘One of the worst things in the world, Edie, is to be a chatterbox. Another, is the wish to do ill to your neighbour. But the worst of all is to make plans for your friends.’ Roger said this very sententiously, because he saw in Edie’s attitude a thin uprearing plant sprung from the seed of his mother’s desire to ‘help’ everybody. He shuddered at the portent; but only for Edie’s edification.

CHAPTER XVII

THE FAREWELL

I

SLEEP was denied to Roger on this night. Instead of sleeping he lay on this side and on that, and stared into the darkness, listening to the starting of strange ghostly noises, and watching the dim shapes that appeared verily to move and make mysterious vague swaying shadows until they melted back to their places and grew once again indistinct. He heard the wind hushing in the trees, and the abrupt whirr of a passing motor speeding to the Great North Road, as romantic as a modern Turpin, making for York and safety beyond. And as his body turned, twisting uncomfortably between the sheets, so turned Roger's thoughts, persistent, weary, as though they too were tired of pressing endlessly against the soft, yielding firmness that hampered free movement. If he could have bitten something, or set his feet firmly against the wall, or done some one of the other desperate things for which his restless mind made him long, Roger might have been appeased. But he was in the midst of modern life, wherein every action checks some other, and every thought carries its own necessary modifications, until the whole is chaotic and bewildering. He could not think simply, because every thought begat others in circles as widening as those of ripples in a pond; he would not break away, or act freely, because every act was related to innumerable others, affecting not himself alone but every other figure in his microcosm. In the ordinary way he did not know this, or if he knew it he disregarded the consequences and slept as safely

as any healthy young man must do; but in the mood of a sleepless night, when vitality is low, and the brain has sagged into the state of an over-worked elastic, thoughts come painfully and full of horrors. He dwelt upon his failures, and dismally upon the things that were expected of him by all those whom he held most dear.

‘Oh *lord!*’ he exclaimed. ‘This is the most rotten business!’

He thought about the office, and about Mary, and about Viola. He thought of Septimus Bright and his dreary vengefulness—but uncomprehendingly, wondering why any man should *want* to interfere with others. And his mind went back always to the office, and Mary, and Viola, as though these three subjects were indeed inexhaustible in their tedium and their power to fret him.

‘Go to sleep,’ he urged. ‘Sleep. . . .’

For a time he lay in a coma; then Viola’s voice would come back, insidiously. He remembered the way she had shrugged her shoulders . . . shrugging them as though in the action she had delivered him to the lions, as remorselessly as any Roman matron might have given an unsuccessful gladiator his death sign. It was unbearable in the darkness.

He sat up in bed, saying ‘Ha!’ in a deep breath at his return to clear vision of the darkness. There was the window; and he could see the pale stars; silent in the world, set deep in a fathomless sky. And the wind passed through the trees, and rustled the ivy round the window. A small bird fluttered in its nest under the eaves, and he heard a faint cheeping, as though some nightmare horror had wakened the bird to the cold night and to safety. Then again was silence. He sat there until he was chilled, and presently slid back again into the warmth, feeling his nightgown icy against his flesh.

‘Damn it, I *am* sick about it!’ he said, mutteringly. ‘As if I was some fool that was born to make mistakes. . . .’

Resentment took him again; he wondered why he did

not burn with anger. It was not anger, now, but a sort of contempt that moved in his thoughts of Viola and himself. What on earth should worry him in this way? There was that poor kid lying miserably in the next room—all her own fault. There was no sense in all the troubles she had magnified into a tragic picture of melancholy. Nobody on earth need do anything disagreeable. Yet they did disagreeable things daily. Why? Well, that was beyond him. He did them himself. He supposed that he was healthy enough, and sane? There was a sort of perversity. . . . He remembered the walk across the Heath with Mary, and he was puzzled anew. What was the matter with her? Was she hysterical?

‘Oh, go to sleep!’ said Roger.

Cadman . . . Cadman. . . . Oh yes! Cadman said he kept on like a gas escape. And old Person thought he was wrong. And Viola. . . . Damn it, Viola had as much right to her opinion as anybody, hadn’t she? What did he really feel about Viola? At the moment, nothing! Yet she worried him. Yes, but no man alive could go on like that: he’d been angry because he thought he wanted her. And he didn’t? Of course he didn’t. . . . If he thought of her in his present home, the thing showed itself absurd. Had he been thinking of some other sort of life? What did he want of her—or she of him?

So the night passed; and the bright chiming clock told him the hours—one, two, three. . . . When the clock was striking six he fell asleep in counting the strokes; and dreamed of Turpin riding into the sea in a motor-car, turning and laughing as clear as day at the open road before and behind. At eight o’clock, when the Dennett day began, Edie’s round face peered surprisingly round his door because of his failure to acknowledge her knock; and Roger awoke to the sensation of cold little fingers walking across his forehead like drops in the torture chamber.

II

So the day began ; and everything went wrong at the office, as everything has a way of doing on such occasions. Cadman was surly, rather ashamed of himself, and inclined not to look at Roger, but to suggest by his manner what a fool he thought he had to handle. Agg was bilious, through going to a literary dinner ; and not too well-pleased because one speaker, in praising younger novelists, had omitted to include his name among the others. Work was slack, and came in small rushes. A lady artist brought great oil-paintings of New Zealand scenery, and wanted a commission to write a book on Maori manners. She said she had notebooks full of accounts of quaint customs, and that no Englishwoman had penetrated so far as she had done into the mysterious customs of this people. Roger found her very boring for she had a hard, lecturing voice, and was inclined to patronize him because he was young and beardless. An agreement could not be found, for Cadman had it laid aside in his desk, and thought that Roger had again been careless. A book that was selling well had run out of stock, and the binders could not promise delivery. Everybody was miserable and irritable with grievances, imagined and actual. Roger felt that he could have kicked his chair out into the passage with the greatest joy in life. The trade department was overrun with booksellers' collectors, standing about with their sacks and leather books, calling over parodies of real titles. Cinch was infuriated. The invoicing clerks were unapproachable, the typists were almost tearful.

'This place is purgatory !' Roger cried, passionately. 'And I'm a silly devil !'

III

When he reached home in the evening he was grumpy with Edie, who could not restrain the quiver in her voice when she next spoke. And Roger felt unable to comfort her, and started out to walk to the Brights' house with the

sensations of an unsuccessful criminal. He felt the wind in his teeth for the first time, jarring them together, and making him shiver. And the road was still heavy with the recent rains, and dark from the clouds that obscured the moon and hid the wandering stars. It was less cold; but it was draughty; and Roger felt stale and flat, vaguely out of patience with his ways and the ways of others—stupid without reason, and clear-sighted enough to understand that he was unreasoning. He was in the worst possible mood for his journey, and ready to be gruff with his best friend. If Viola had known, she would have postponed his visit; but she was a little nervous on her own account, and worried about Septimus, who was in high fever and delirious. There seemed no peace for the residents of North London, for a great fire was raging in Camden Town, and throwing lurid reflections upon the low, rolling clouds that seemed to presage a storm. In Marjorie Road, Grace was nervously happy, because Edwin Gower had suggested an early marriage. The others were full of bitterness, and Mabel was nowhere to be seen.

IV

At the Brights' house, the door was opened to Roger by the servant-girl, who ushered him into the now familiar sitting-room. He looked instinctively across to the mantelpiece to find the photograph of Viola as a younger girl, and did not notice that Robson Joyce was there, smoking a cigar.

'Hello, Dennett,' came a voice, and Joyce uncrossed his legs, waving a friendly hand. He was flushed, from a good dinner, and inclined to be jovial. 'The scene of your former triumphs. I say, they tell me the boy's very bad.'

He sat rakishly in an arm-chair, with his head back, his moustache bristling, and his cunning old eyes half closed. Roger saw his red farmer's face, and noticed how his moustache bristled, without, at first, remembering who he was.

'Hullo . . . what are *you* doing here?' he asked.

Joyce stroked his moustache with jewelled hands.

'Well, my boy . . . *Mum!* But I'm going to be Father Bright,' he admitted.

'Dear me. I'm glad to hear it. I hope it'll sober you into a good citizen.'

'Well, you see. I'm a . . . I'm a homely sort of chap. I've been knocking about, and all that. All my travellin' around—knocks a man up a bit to go back to digs, or a boarding-house. I want a home of my own. I say, Dennett. . . . What d'ye think of Aggie? All right, eh?'

'A lucky dog!' commented Roger.

'So *I* think. Dooce of a job, and all that. I reckon I know a good thing when it's going. Eh what? Ye-es. Mind you, Dennett, it's not everybody's lay. Now a young fellow like you. . . . My advice to you is to see a bit more of the girls before you. . . . See what I mean?' He held up podgy fingers in warning, very much like a large red baby who has just learned that such a gesture provokes merriment. 'When the time comes—settle down, same as I'm doing. Don't be in a hurry, Dennett. Young fellow like you wants to know his way about a bit before he settles down. See what I mean? I know . . . you think it's very nice to have a bit of goods on your arm, and all that. All I say is, don't get the yoke on too hasty. I'm an older man than you. . . . I've seen a bit of fun in my time, and all that. I've dropped on a good thing. . . .'

'I'm sure of it,' Roger said, mechanically. 'You're all *right*.'

Joyce grunted and puffed at his cigar.

'They tell me the boy's in a bad way,' he said, solemnly. 'Upstairs.'

'Seriously ill, d'you mean?'

'Off his head. . . . All about paper, paper, paper. Talks about you, too. Something about his girl. I say, where is she? Too proper, I s'pose to come to his bedside, and all that.'

'Paper,' Roger said, unable to grasp the later allusions in his snatch at the fatal word.

'I s'pose he's been thinkin' about that mess-up of yours.'

'That's what *I* thought.'

'They get it on their minds. *Any* old thing. Keeps on goin' round and round. Pneumonia, you know. He's quite light-headed. Aggie, I mean Mrs. Bright's with him all the time. It's too much for a woman like her to have on her shoulders. I *said* to her: where do I come in? She's . . .' His voice lingered sentimentally for a minute. 'I say. . . . Did I ever tell you that story about the parson and the ——'

'How long's he been ill?' asked Roger. 'Since Monday? Yesterday, I mean?'

'Doctor says he'll get over it or go under in a couple of days. It's a very serious bout. These weedy lads. He hasn't got an ounce of stamina. Never had a decent meal in his life, *I* shouldn't think, to look at him. I had a brother—Percy his name was. As good a chap as you ever saw. Caught a cold on Saturday. Buried in a week.'

'Sounds lively,' Roger said, uncomfortably. 'I hope it's nothing of that sort here.'

'Oh, I don't know. I've seen stranger things. After all, what's the good of him? If he goes, the girl gets a bit more. That's all it amounts to. See what I mean? Mind you: they are neither of 'em a patch on my girl. She loses it all. That's what she's doing for my sake. Gives it all up. The girl—what's name?—gets the whole caboodle. Not bad luck, eh? Ye-es. Not many women would give that up for a chap. . . . Mind you, I can give her a good home. All that sort of thing, you know. D'you know how much I'm insured for? Eight hundred pounds. Costs me a matter of thirty pounds a year to keep *that* up. How much d'you reckon I'm worth? Not personalty. . . . What would you put it down, eh? Give a guess!'

Viola came into the room.

'If you'll go up, Mr. Joyce,' she said, 'you'll find Agatha

in his room. Where you were yesterday . . .' She kept her face turned away from Roger until Joyce was outside the room. Then she looked towards him. 'So you've come,' she said, quietly.

V

She stood before him as alert and as delicately poised as ever. Her dark hair was massed on the top of her head; her unreadable face was paler than usual, and her clear, unsensitive mouth was slightly open. Slim though she was, Viola gave him a sense of vigour and of admirable proportion. Everything about her, from the carriage of her head to the lines of her slender figure, was effective and noticeable; but while she was graceful and well-shaped, it was from care and thought rather than from spontaneous buoyancy. Yet she would not let him see her eyes, in case he read too much. In her care for externals she could never lose sight of them. It was even now her first thought that she must give nothing away. The idea that she might unwittingly let him see her love was paramount. Just as nobody could have taken innocent pleasure in her shapeliness without the instinctive knowledge that she was well-corseted, so here she was on guard against him, discreet rather than modest, clear-sighted rather than guileless. She had kept her place in an office full of rivals by setting her sharper wits against the sharp wits of her neighbours.

'Joyce says your brother's very ill,' began Roger, awkwardly enough. 'I'm sorry to hear it.'

'We've had a terrible doing,' Viola said. 'He was an idiot to go to the office yesterday. But he did it,'—so she tried to suggest her interest in himself—'because he wanted to get you into trouble.'

'Surely ——'

'I *know*. I feel a bit sick about it,' she confessed. 'Still, that's the sort of people we are. And now you know it. Shocks you, doesn't it?'

'It doesn't seem quite worth while,' Roger said. 'If it's made him so queer.'

'He didn't know it was going to do that. I suppose he thought it wouldn't. Won't you sit down? I've written to Mary; but she hasn't come. It would be nice if she came while you're here. Then you could see her home, couldn't you?'

She was looking at him as she sat opposite, in the chair lately vacated by Joyce. In her voice, as she spoke of Mary, there was a sneer. It stung Roger to the heart.

'She won't come,' he said, suddenly.

'I should have thought it was the least she could do. After all, she *is* engaged to Sep. Though you mightn't think so.' . . . She twisted in the chair, putting her hand to her lips. But she was still looking away, at the fire, and never meeting his eyes. 'You might *say* something.'

'Mary's very ill herself,' Roger went on, not looking at her in his turn. 'I'm sorry your brother's laid up.'

'Serves him jolly well right. You ought to be angry with him. I should have thought you'd got more spirit. What's happened at Tremlett's?'

'I've been sacked.'

'I'm sorry.' She looked at him again. 'No wonder you're glum. No, I'm real sorry. He *is* a beast, like that. He's been madly jealous about Mary.'

'Mary!' Roger's enlightenment came suddenly. He whistled in his amazement.

'You can't *blame* him.'

'Is *that* what's made all the trouble?' Roger said. 'What a fathead the man is!' He was still occupied with the surprising clarification. 'Mary!'

'Oh Roger, you *are* a—something!' Viola could not keep still, but went behind him so that he could not see her. He turned round, however, and looked at her over the top of the chair.

'It's no good your talking like that,' he objected. 'I

don't think of these things, I suppose. But why feel venomous? What did he think I'd do?'

'Well!' cried Viola. 'Don't you see that Mary's—Hm. Yes, you ought to take something for it. What do they call it—Myopia?'

Roger's myopic brain was still in a state of dim, imperfect vision.

'I'll tell you this one thing,' he said, soberly. 'It's bad for your brother to make trouble for me at the office; but I think it's worse of you to talk like that about Mary.'

Viola was almost crying; but no hint of tears was in her jeering voice.

'A nice girl wouldn't do it, I suppose,' she said.

'A wise girl wouldn't,' Roger supplemented. 'I suppose the two things are the same?'

'Not on your life!' cried Viola. She came back to her chair, and sat down. He saw her little shoes crossed; but they moved continually, as though they held all the electricity that she was striving to control. 'You're a perfect beast to-night. I've told you I'm sorry. I suppose you're sulky because I didn't fall on your neck last Sunday. I knew Mary would do that! Little ——'

Roger rose to his feet.

'Look here,' he said. 'I really *can't*. What was it you wanted to say to me?'

'Sorry I'm boring you.'

'Boring's not the *word*. You're simply *chasing* me away, like a bad music-hall turn.' He was trying still, in a dull, laboured way, to keep his temper and treat her frankly. 'I expect you're tired with nursing, and the worry of your brother.'

'My brother! My brother! I'm sick of you—always keeping on about my brother. I'm a fool, I suppose, to talk like this. But *Roger!*'

If Roger had been less irritably looking and frowning at his boots, he might have seen Viola's eyes holding for once an unguarded expression. He was incapable of loving her

at this moment; he was incapable, certainly of liking her. She seemed to have become as strident as any woman in a slum, arguing before neighbours. And a genuine, unselfish rage was rising in Roger's breast at her mention of Mary. Mary, who was helpless; Mary, who was a little brick; Mary, who was more simple and more modest than any other girl in the world. It was monstrous that she should be traduced, even to himself, who could take the talk at its true valuelessness.

'What was it you wanted to say to me?' he asked, stubbornly.

The eager light faded from Viola's face. Her lids drooped for an instant, half in contempt, half in angry despair. She could not bring him to her side in such a mood; it was as though he were straining to get away from her, so that tenderness, or whatever cajolery she might employ, would only irritate him still more, and would assuredly make the breach between them wider and less bridgeable. Whatever may have been Viola's wish or intention in provoking the interview, she was too much afraid to put it into execution. She took refuge in a sort of petrified flippancy, that was as much out of key as her references to Mary.

'Thought you'd like the latest about Sep,' she said. 'I know what friends you are. I thought you'd like to know what he's done at Tremlett's, *in case you hadn't heard already*. Besides, I thought you might be panting to come.'

'Viola!' Roger came forward. He was very near her; their faces were close together; and she looked into his angry eyes. She stood, unflinching, quite white. In an instant the strain was over, but it was succeeded by such an agonizing knowledge of failure that she tottered. Roger caught her arm. 'You're not well,' he said.

'Quite . . . well . . . thank you,' Viola panted, and bit her lip. Oh, what a fool she'd been! A blind fool! The touch of his hand—ever so slight; the faintest contact with him, thrilled her as she had never been thrilled before.

But she knew she had lost him, knew that he had never really been hers at all. It had only been something she had planned; a snare she had laid, to catch her own feet. The knowledge pressed upon her brain like a slow weight. She knew that, in some dim way, unknown to any of them, that shapes destinies, and makes human actions so incalculable, it had been Mary all the time.

VI

‘I’m afraid I can’t stay down here any longer,’ Viola said, in a minute. ‘Agatha’s sitting with Sep. You’d better go now. Thanks for coming. I’ll send you a line when we know about Sep. . . . You’ll be glad to hear.’

Roger was standing, staring at her, his lips parted. For an instant he did not speak; but at last he smiled, and said, rather seriously:—

‘I hope it’ll be good news. I’ll . . . I’ll . . .’ He had been going to say something about Mary. Instead, he flushed to his brow, and stopped. ‘Good-bye. You must tell me what you asked me to come for some other time. You will, won’t you?’

‘No,’ said Viola. ‘I shan’t ever tell you now. Not as long as I live.’ She turned away towards the door; but when he was close upon her, in the passage, she caught his arm, pressing it with a strange vehemence. ‘I say, you won’t bear me a grudge because of what I said about . . . about her . . . will you?’

Roger shook his head, and she saw the movement in the dim light of the flaring gas.

‘D’you take it all back?’ he asked.

‘No,’ Viola said, surprisingly. ‘Not a word of it.’

Roger looked out at the front-door, and at the dark street. And the memory of that windy night’s walk came back to him like the gust of the breeze itself. It ran through his blood like the surge of breakers upon a sandy shore, and he found Viola beside him as she had been then, breasting the hillside against the wind. He did not re-

member anything but the sense of great splendid energy and his happiness; and something made him glance half shyly at Viola. It was not for to-night, that quick, rushing pleasure of facing and beating the elements; he had a quick perception of this as one of those memories that seem impossible as anticipations. He knew that the walk would never come again; it was beyond imagining. It stood like a solitary phenomenon, isolated, apart from everything else in his life. But she had been capable of it: she was still capable of giving surprise; she was still unplumbed, and unfathomable.

'All the same,' he said, with the stars above him, and the faintest whiff of wind on his cheeks and in his clear eyes, 'I won't bear a grudge!' The new kindness in his voice stabbed Viola. It was too friendly. If she had been anything to him, he could never have spoken so. Viola did not remember her own tones of the past, or her old actions. She only remembered the feeling in her heart.

'It's a fine night. Ugh. Isn't it chilly!' She drew in, shivering, and left him alone in sight of the street. It was as though she were frightened of the wind and the night. Roger looked back, puzzled. He could not understand why the change had come, but he knew it was there between them. 'Goodbye, Roger,' said Viola, hurriedly. 'Sorry to hurry you off the step. *Mind* the step.'

She watched him make his way to the gate, saw him raise his cap and wave his hand; and then went up to relieve Agatha. In the sick-room, Septimus was mumbling to himself, 'Dennett . . . Dennett . . . We shall see . . .'

'That's all right, my boy,' Viola whispered to herself. 'We *have* seen!'

Later, she found that she had torn her handkerchief into streamers and trailing pieces of thread, in order to prevent herself from screaming while she kept her vigil beside the dying Septimus.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FORTUNE OF WAR

I

WHEN he was some yards away from the house, Roger stopped, his mind in a tumult. What did it all mean? What was behind Viola's sneer at Mary, and behind Septimus Bright's jealousy? Was there anything there at all? He and Mary had been good friends all their lives; he could remember her clearly from the time when she was a small girl, adoring as only small girls can. Surely everybody had a way of distorting very simple things so that they became evil! Mary, at the party, had been as simple and as friendly as any girl could be; he had not thought her indiscreet; he had been delighted to find her so unspoiled. Yet he knew the Amersons and their kind; he knew that in the London suburbs social intercourse between the sexes is limited to courtship. There were no friends among girls and young men. He knew that directly a young man grew friendly he became amorous; and that girls giggled themselves into a state of self-consciousness. He knew it, but he knew also that the custom among these people did not affect Mary and himself. Except that she was less free to respond than she would have been in the homes of more intelligent Suburbans, Mary was as ungoverned by her family as he was by his own. It was always a personal matter with those who had any personality to exploit: only the pathetic puppets that ugly, conventional families produced were guided by the expectations of their friends. Viola was not closely informed about Mary: she must have taken her brother's absurd jealousy as a base,

and developed from that an imagined character that did not resemble Mary's. Viola did not know; nobody had any right to know Mary's feeling. He didn't understand it himself; but he knew that Mary was much more unaffected than her sisters. She was different—that was all. She was Mary.

He knew how full of horror he had been at the news of her engagement to Septimus Bright. Was that *all* due to his dislike of Bright? Was nothing due to some deeper feeling for Mary? It was surely only friendship that bound them. But he had known instinctively of whom Edie had spoken the previous evening. His vision of Mary was not pictorial, as was the case with Viola. He simply felt comradeship. . . . Was it no more? If he had loved her, he would have been passionately opposed to her engagement to Bright; the thought of Bright kissing her would have sent a tremor through him. Yes, but he had never thought about it all; nor, he was sure, had Mary. He *must* find out what led to the engagement. It had always been ridiculous, unbelievable. . . . Yes, but good God, to *think* of Bright kissing her! A fierce anger came upon him. His cheek reddened with shame. And Mary had permitted it! What did he think of her for that? Of course, it was intolerable. The thing had been a ghastly mistake all through; and his own part in it the part of a coward. He had given Mary up, without a blow, without ever frankly looking the difficulty in the face. He had abandoned her to Bright! There had been his foolish, vain inquiry on the day he first heard of the engagement; but he had not talked straight. He had been afraid to ask Mary what was really the matter. He imagined himself insisting on Bright's dismissal; and felt self-contempt. Mary was still to be only a pawn, to be taken in a pause in the game, when the major pieces could not advantageously be moved.

He had been walking unconsciously forward all the time, and his face was fiery. In every way he felt that he had been dishonourable. He had dishonoured her by

going with Viola to the concert; he had dishonoured her when he kissed Viola, when he acquiesced in her engagement, when he insulted her sympathy. For a moment Roger was as morbidly scrupulous as a prig; but he was not a prig. He was quite sincerely trying to understand how Mary might have felt under his conduct. Later, he saw that his contrition was exaggerated, that he had been silly, indeed, but that foolishness was not restricted to himself. He even understood, rather candidly, that Mary had been silly.

II

The wind had driven the clouds into the Home counties, where doubtless the rain did more good than it would have done in London; and the sky was now serene and clear, full of stars and the radiance of a cold moon. Roger saw his shadow stunted before him as he walked, and every blade of grass upon Hampstead Heath stood revealed like one of a multitude of spears. He stood for a moment on the edge of the chilled heath, full of an excited romance, his eyes soft with the beauty of the world before him and the love within. What would he say to Mary, or do to show his desire to serve? If love were almighty, then surely the happiness all desired might come to those who truly humbled themselves before the beauty of love? He had no fear of Mary, because it was revealed to him that the secrets of her heart were as true as those of his own; Mary and he were not strangers talking vainly in discordant tongues, chancing the identity of one in a thousand words. He had, while he stood thus on the edge of this Heath (littered though the grass may be on bank holidays by East-End roisterers, but never spoiled), no fear of anything at all! He saw everything with clear eyes and a heart of steel, undaunted and confident, ready for disappointment and for struggle. And he gave a low laugh as he stepped forward, for in the luxury of imagining he had forgotten that this strange communion of souls into the

vision of which he had been led by his emotion and the moonlight lacked the seal of confirmation. He was ready enough with his thoughts of the goodness of life; but Mary was ill, he had no prospective situation, he was still at a disadvantage in the battle. And above all, Mary was not free to take up her part in the pageant of his dream. But in spite of the knowledge that his castle was built of air, Roger was not overthrown. He thought that many air-castles had before now shown foundations laid firmly in the earth.

‘A little more attention to business,’ he said. ‘That’s what’s wanted. And Mary to see the matter with unprejudiced eyes!’ And he took long strides over the Heath.

III

As he walked, Roger’s eyes became accustomed to the pale strong light of the moon, that distorted even while it revealed; and he could see far ahead. It was curious, he thought, that he should imagine two black figures directly in his path; yet there they were, motioning and gesticulating together, and as silent as little marionettes, so far distant were they when he first noticed them. As he drew nearer he could see that one was a girl, and the other a young man of about his own age. They were evidently disagreeing; and once, when the girl’s face was at a particular angle, the moon caught it, so that her hurried movement looked like a streak of light. They were withdrawn from the path, and they disappeared as a black hedge behind them rose up into Roger’s line of sight and enveloped the figures in its gloom. He forgot about the quarrelling figures and thought of Mary; but now, every second, he could hear some word, as a sharper vowel travelled on the air. He was still not near enough to piece these straying words into coherence; but at last, quite suddenly, he heard:—

‘Don’t be a fool! I tell you I *can’t* . . . Why, *half* the girls do it . . .’

A wailing sound came from the girl, as though she were speaking through tears.

‘Hello!’ said Roger, to himself. ‘What’s this?’

‘Oh, don’t talk silly!’

‘Mabel and her swain!’ flashed into Roger’s mind. ‘What are they doing here?’ He quickened his speed. The young man was walking away, and Mabel was following, still talking endlessly in the midst of weeping. Roger could not see their shadows, which fell behind them; but the moon was on their faces, and he could not mistake either. Mabel? What on earth was she doing here so late?

‘Stop it; here’s somebody coming!’ Moggerson said, and looked angrily ahead, the clear light shining behind Roger and into his own eyes, so that he could not recognize the on-comer.

‘Hi!’ called Roger. ‘Is that Mabel?’

A confused sound answered him; and Moggerson started to run suddenly—a thin jumping figure in the strong light, and his shadow dancing. Mabel screamed. Roger ran, too, and reached Moggerson, clutching at his coat.

‘Here—let me go. Let me go, I say,’ Moggerson wrenched his arm free, and struck Roger across the face, running again, away towards the far-distant houses. For a moment they scrambled together over the grass, and then Roger’s condition again told in his favour. He overtook his quarry, and caught him by the arm.

‘What’s all this?’ he panted. ‘What are you running away for?’ They looked into each other’s eyes, breathing hard; and Moggerson tried violently to free himself. Mabel was running exhaustedly after them, making little sobbing sounds, like a tired child lagging behind its mother.

‘Let me go!’ cried Moggerson, whirling his arms. ‘Damn you!’ He hit Roger in the chest, and again under the chin. Roger felt his teeth click together; and he punched hard. Moggerson fell suddenly to the ground.

When he arose, it was with great oaths and show of hands. He held his hands like a professional; for he had often watched boxing matches. Roger held his hands like an amateur with an instinct for using them. They feinted and struck, circling in the moonlight, both very pale, and Moggerson's face glistening with sweat. There was a quick scrambling scuffle, and Roger went down, sitting on the ground for a fraction of time. But he was quickly up again, and he was smiling as though he had just found how delightful it was to fight.

'Bert . . . Bert,' cried Mabel, faintly.

'You devil,' Moggerson was muttering. 'You filthy devil.' He was getting more wary now; his breath was coming and going like air in a hand-pump, wheezing in his throat; and his mouth was as dry as dust. Roger could see his body bent forward and sometimes caught a glimpse of his own shadow, rising upon Moggerson's legs; but he did not dare to lower his eyes. He had an unreasoning fear lest Moggerson might bruise his face. It was not vanity; but it shocked him to think of presenting himself to Mary so disfigured. Perhaps that thought finished the scuffle more quickly; for he started punching Moggerson in the ribs, and soon saw him flat on his back, feebly gasping for breath.

'Bert!' cried Mabel, and dropped on her knees beside Moggerson, drawing his hands up on to his breast as though he were dead, and seeing them slip down again. Moggerson, in his impatience, struck the ground.

'He's all right,' Roger said, gulping still from his exertions. 'What's all the row?'

'Bert!' cried Mabel, in a frenzy.

'Go to hell!' said Moggerson, sitting up, with his hand to his face. He began to cough as the wind came whipping freshly from the east. Roger looked from one face to the other, shining clear in the moonlight, and they both looked so woebegone that he could not help smiling. Mabel was still kneeling beside Moggerson, but she no longer touched

him, and seemed as though she could not yet realize their position. She was absolutely forlorn, kneeling there in the strong white light, her face swollen with long crying, her prettiness dissolved in all her anxious thought of disgrace and danger. Roger turned away to Moggerson.

'Get up, man,' he said impatiently. 'What's it all about?' He knew what was the matter; but he knew that it was none of his business. He almost gasped at the thought that he had intruded himself into this scene. Gladly would he now have withdrawn, only he was too deeply committed. Mabel rose slowly to her feet, and they stood in a triangle.

'What's it to do with you whether I marry her or not!' cried Moggerson. 'Come interferin'. Mean to say . . . just because you come along.'

'Why did you run away then?'

'Oh, stop your row! Bad enough to have *her* yappin'.' Moggerson brought out his handkerchief, and began, with trembling hands, to smear it over his face. A thin trickle of blood came from his nostril. Roger looked again from one to the other, frowning. His own breathlessness had passed; but he still tingled from the sensations of the fight; and his right knuckle ached where it had several times struck one of Moggerson's buttons.

'He's got to marry me!' Mabel said, hysterically.

Thus did she put Roger definitely in possession of her secret. Moggerson made two or three steps away, as though he was too tired to run, but as though his inclination persisted.

'Of course he'll marry you,' Roger said quickly. 'Don't cry, Mabel; you'll be sick.' It really seemed as though she did not know what she was doing, for her mouth was twisted down, and her face was swollen and quivering. 'You *want* to marry him, don't you?'

Moggerson stood sulkily by, stanching the trickle of blood.

'It's all very well for you to talk. You can't get married

on thirty-five bob a week,' he said. 'Not and keep up . . . It's absurd! She *knows* it is.'

'Seems to me you can't help yourself,' Roger said, standing square in the ghastly light. Moggerson looked up sharply at his tone.

'Oh,' he sneered. 'So *that's* your game? Why, how do I know ——'

Roger held up his fist, all bruised.

'That's the only argument that convinces you,' he said grimly. 'Don't you see that if you get her into a scrape you're bound to get her out of it? You can't have it both ways. See, good man?'

'Bert!' implored Mabel. 'I'll *work*!' Her abasement came upon Roger as a shock. To him it made her simply despicable. He did not understand that she was unconscious of his presence. She went right past him in her endeavour to reach Moggerson's heart. It was to Bert that she abased herself.

'I'd a married her all right,' Moggerson said, hesitatingly, showing the narrow circuit of his mind, and addressing himself entirely, as man to man, to Roger. 'I mean to say. . . . Any *need* for it. She's makin' such a *fuss*. Good lord ——anybody'd think half the girls didn't ——'

'Don't talk rot!' Roger said, quietly. 'Not girls like Mabel.'

'I tell you ——' Moggerson became emphatic; but Roger shook his head. They stood, exchanging a long glance, until Moggerson's eyes fell.

'Well,' suggested Roger. 'You'll see to it? Don't forget me.'

'I'll see her home,' Moggerson said. His eyes were still low, but he began to smile rather sheepishly. In a minute, he said: 'A . . . That'll be all right. . . . Come on, Mabel.'

Roger watched them go south, towards the distant houses arm-in-arm—strange little black figures with crawling shadows on the grass. Mabel parted from Roger without so much as a glance, clinging tightly to Moggerson's

arm, and still shivering. Yet, as he thought to himself on the way home, there might have been some virtue in his superior prowess that deserved her acknowledgment. He had no means of knowing whether Moggerson would have yielded to other persuasion than force. And he was too full of satisfaction at his own skill to be very just or attractive himself.

IV

It was not until he had left them that Roger took the encounter seriously. Then he clearly saw that this was one of the prime causes of Mary's collapse. What her part in the matter had been, he did not, of course, know; he could not tell whether she had been simply shocked, or whether she had taken some better course. But he thought of Mary with great enthusiasm. It gave him a tremendous pleasure to think that she was out of the Amerson household for the time being. He liked to think of her in his own home, shining there as only a good girl could do, in the midst of his other pleasures. When he came to think of such things, it was extraordinary to perceive how much his home meant to him, as a place—not merely of residence, but of resort. He felt that at home he could exploit his own ingenuity and be natural without being thought a fool. In his home, as a great writer has well said, a man may, if he likes, have his meals on the floor; and if Roger's fancy never took quite that turn, there was always a possibility that it might do so at some future time. It was jolly to look forward to going home; and home was the warmest, most comfortable word in his vocabulary.

‘Poor old Person!’ he thought to himself. ‘If he could see me thinking that!’

He proceeded to embroider upon his idea of home as he walked towards it, with his blood singing and his head among the stars, as Gulliver's might have been in Lilliput. Home, he argued, is a symbol. It is often a place where fools congregate. Some homes were not homes at all—but

places where families were kept by custom, as those vile things called 'Happy Families' were kept. Places where jarring temperaments met, where the decency of common politeness was violated, where people without love for one another wrangled and sapped the strength from one another. Those were not homes, but cages. A home was a good place, whither one might retire for peace, or jollification, where one might indulge in frankness (tempered by tact), and where one *did* feel happy. A really Happy Family, said Roger to himself, is one where all give to the common good, where each individual is considered, where each individual considers the rest. A really Happy Family, in short, he proceeded to state, is one where children are considered of the first importance. That had been the case in his own family; why should it not be so elsewhere? The family, after all, was an institution founded upon an idea. It was founded upon the idea of the next generation. The next generation was the most important thing in the world.

'We,' said Roger, 'are the next generation. And to us the most important is the one that follows. Good families produce good next-generations. Bad families are forced into narrow individualism. They can't think of any others besides themselves.'

He was feeling exceedingly sagacious when he tripped upon a stone. So well-trained was his sense of humour that he did not forget his discourse for an instant. Where an egoist would have concentrated upon his bruised toe, Roger embraced the possibility of having all his toes bruised in his pursuit of the truth. He was a philosopher, brooding with pity upon the spectacle of a heedless world, restless and wakeful under the cold moon. Restless with vague and useless discontent—never the divine discontent of poets, but always the mundane discontent of lost endeavour. Helpless, and wandering, like dishevelled stars in the empty spaces.

He remembered his luminous conversation on the

family with Edie; and recalled what he had said about the *status quo*. Well, there was that forlorn aspect of his own family. There was no progress here. The Dennetts were not providing the next generation with many recruits. He wandered into Malthusianism. And when he found himself there he knew it was time to stop. For although he was ready to talk largely about the family he knew that he never dared go beyond the absolute into the abstract. He could think of one kind of family as good; and one as bad; but he could never think in general terms of all families on the habitable globe. But he came to one definite conclusion. He found that he believed in freedom for all—even for the ignorant and stupid, so long as they did not interfere with his own freedom. But he thought that many unimaginative people were the most prolific; while many imaginative people took no thought for tomorrow. It was not that people were degenerate; it was, that those who multiplied fastest were the spiritually unproductive ones.

‘We must,’ said Roger, ‘have a change. We must give the fine spirits a lead to take up a worthy profession. We must have fewer Happy Families, and more Really Happy Families.’

Then he saw that he was become rather inane, and reached the road that leads into South Grove, Highgate. And so, by stages, he concluded an eventful evening, still exhilarated, and still inclined to be very talkative. It was as though Viola Bright had drifted out of his experience altogether, so remote she was from any one of his passing thoughts.

CHAPTER XIX

THE END OF THE STORY

I

IT was a selected band of uncles, aunts, and cousins that gathered at Marjorie Road for the funeral of Jerrard Amerson. Very few cousins were there—the giggling girls were all absent, and were going about their work very much as usual, except when they heard a bell of any kind, when they thought immediately of funerals and of their uncle. They all said, ‘Poor Aunt Alice. Good job she’s got Tom and Grace.’ They said, shaking their heads, that with five children Aunt Alice would not feel the blow so keenly. The older ones remembered hints of Aunt Alice as a neglected wife. One very young one said, in a clear voice, instantly hushed by her hearers: ‘Isn’t it lucky they’d got their party over!’ ‘Is this,’ said one rebuking relative, ‘a time to talk about parties?’

The day was cold and raw. The funeral horses neighed, sending into silent shivers those inhabitants of Marjorie Road who were encamped behind their curtains or their drawn blinds, watching the proceedings. A little crowd of children and idlers watched the serious procession of relatives issue from the house. They stood all round the hearse, and made sounds expressive of awe as the richly-wreathed coffin was shovelled in by panting bearers. One old charwoman electrified all who heard by crying out twice, loudly, ‘Gawd rest ’is soul, Gawd rest ’is soul’. Some of the men took off their caps in response to a moribund instinct. The cortège set off very slowly, a few little boys following. For some reason, common to such occasions, the

body was not to be buried in the nearest cemetery, but was to be taken to a distant place for interment. As soon as the hearse passed the borders of the parish the horses were set to a smart trot. Over the coffin a clergyman said the service very speedily, as he had to bury several people within a given time. His eye roamed over the company, seeking for attractive faces upon which to rest awhile.

‘Good job it’s not wet,’ said one of the uncles to another. ‘When we buried Lucy we all got cold, standing out in the rain. This is a field day compared to it.’

Mrs. Amerson sobbed bitterly at the end. Only Gran’mā and Mabel were left at home; and Mrs. Amerson, Grace, Tom and Ted travelled together in the first mourning coach, looking persistently out of the windows.

II

At Tremlett & Grove’s they had no time to think of funerals. All day long the trade department was full of collectors, pushing each other like patient cattle, sometimes clucking their tongues when they had waited over long, and pushing out of the place as soon as they were served. Some of them, in cold, curling boots, would be tramping round London with heavy packs as long as publishers could be relied upon to be open for trade. In the office, Cinch was as busy as could be, directing the packers, and walking sharply from one man to another with directions. His work was not pleasant at this time of the year, for country booksellers were irritable, and vague ladies all over England were sending imperfect orders and inquiries which had to be dealt with courteously even if they only involved a turnover of half a crown.

Roger, in his den, or elsewhere, worked like a fiend. Even Cinch was at last moved to admiration and thanks.

‘I don’t know what I should have done without you,’ he grumbled. He went even so far as to say to Cadman: ‘Young Dennett’s putting his back into it. He’s a good lad.’

'Oh,' said Cadman grimly. 'You think so.'

Presently Cadman sent for Roger.

'Sit down, Dennett. Cinch tells me you're working, eh? Well now, d'you want to stay on?'

'Yes,' said Roger. 'If you think you can trust me.'

'Damned careless, you know. There's not many men who'd give you another chance. Think so? Well, fact is, Dennett, I like you. But no more tricks. Mind! I shan't forget this. No, I shan't forget it, nor your impertinence when I talked. . . . Oh, yes it was! Well now, you get on with your work. Now, as to this matter of McPherson; we've got him all right—in spite of the agents. Eh? I'm glad we've got him. You might tell Agg. That's all, Dennett.'

Roger went back to his room, sober.

'Thank God!' he was saying to himself; but he did not know he was saying it.

III

The Amersons and their uncles and aunts were seated at the funeral luncheon, the aunts still in their black hats, with thick black veils drawn up above the tips of their noses until they looked like highwaymen's masks. The uncles sat back from the table, rather awkwardly, stiff in their unaccustomed black clothes, half enjoying the feast, half uncomfortable because they had nothing to say. Nobody wanted to laugh; but all found the strain of continued solemnity rather wearing. The aunts had red rims and bright, inquiring eyes, that watched how everything was done. Mrs. Amerson sat heavily by herself, crumbling a piece of bread with fingers that trembled. Occasionally, one uncle would try unsuccessfully to break the silence with a muttered 'Ah, well!' but he never proceeded any further, so that they all seemed to be waiting for something to happen.

'*Very* nice!' one aunt said, in a whisper, to Grace, who had superintended the meal-serving. There grew steadily

an inclination to look at watches and shake heads. Several of them had pushed back their chairs, preparatory to rising as soon as anybody else had the courage to set an example.

‘Yes . . . very sad. . . . See, how old was he?’ one uncle said to Tom.

‘Oh, he was sixty . . . ’ Tom said, moodily. ‘It’s been a big strain.’

‘Must have been. Must have been,’ improvised the uncle—a large red shopkeeper from South London. ‘Yes, must have been. I was saying to—to your aunt there that. . . . Well, he never said anything to *me*. . . . Never told *me* anything, as you might say, about his . . . a . . . ’

‘You mean his affairs? Absolutely nothing but the house. Of course we shall let. That’ll bring fifty-five or sixty. Dickertons are going to allow my mother a hundred a year—in recognition of his long services. They’re making my salary two-fifty. . . . ’

‘That’s very good.’

‘Might have been worse. You know Grace and Mabel are going to be married at once?’

‘Is that so?’ said the uncle.

‘Quietly, of course.’

‘That leaves—how many of you?’

‘There’s my grandmother, my mother, Mary, and myself. Ted announces his intention of living on his own. Yes, I don’t altogether agree with it; but he’s a strange fellow. No; but he tells me he’s got a chance of a new situation—a good one. Some rich man he knows is finding him a place in his office. I don’t hide from you that I should have liked his help. But at least we shall be free of him. . . . ’

Tom, very tall, inclined his head to his interlocutor with an air of seriousness that became him very well. The uncles, in future meetings, spoke of him with the greatest respect.

‘And yourself ——?’

Tom shrugged his shoulders.

'I'm not thinking of marrying—yet awhile,' he said hardly. 'Mabel and her husband are going to take rooms with us. He's not rich; but we've arranged that. Mary, unfortunately, is ill, and away; so that we can't tell what will be done about her.'

'Well, it's a sad break-up,' said the uncle.

'True,' Tom admitted. 'I think we shall pull through. It isn't as though I was a novice, who lost my head. My grandmother, poor old soul, is very old. She might go at any time.'

The uncle, thinking matters over, thought Tom had his head screwed on the right way.

'Seems to me,' he said, bluntly, 'they're damned fortunate to have you to look after things a bit. I can see you've got the makings of a fine man in you, Tom. My advice to you, my boy, is "Stick to it". You won't go far wrong then. Now, I'll just say a word to your mother there, and me and your aunt'll be off. If you stick to it, you'll be a better man than your father, Tom. And that's saying a good deal.'

Tom, with bowed head, smiled gravely at the praise. There was a scuffling of chairs; and everybody was glad to be out of the house, walking to the tramcars or to the railway stations. Not one of them had felt the dignity of sorrow; they appreciated only the discomfort of attending a ceremony the invitation to which was coveted by each one of them. If they had not been invited, they would have been hurt; going home, after the event, they removed outdoor wraps and satisfied their descendants and dependents as to the exact number of guests, and the composition of the party, and the style in which everything had been done. To them, the day was over. 'The End' was put to this volume of Amerson history. To the Amersons themselves the last page was turned. Only Mrs. Amerson found a slightly unexpected Epilogue.

IV

Mary was so very much better that she was allowed to get up, and to sit warmly by the fire. She was still nervous, and inclined to tremble; but she was already happier in the sense of being cared-for by those who loved her. She sat looking with glowing eyes at Mrs. Dennett and at Edie as they went on with their work, or came to see whether they could do anything for the invalid they found so tranquilly within their toils. They gloated over her, with smiling triumph; and Edie said:—

‘I just *knew* we’d get you, you know.’

Mary, in her weak state, was unready for such kindness; and she had to bite her lips to prevent herself from being sentimental. They were so glad of her, that she thought desperately of the time when she would be well, and forced to leave this pleasant haven. What could she do? She thought until her head ached. She thought: ‘I *can’t* go back!’ She remembered how often she had wanted not to do things; and how she had been made to do them—not because anybody insisted, but because it was impossible to be independent. On the night of the party she had felt that she *could* not go up to her room; but there was no other place to sleep in. That was a typical instance. She had been unable to throw off the yoke. She had been made to do everything simply because, in their house, there was nothing else to be done. Having, in her early years, accepted her position in the family, she had never been able to emancipate herself. The law had always been: Mother first; then the boys; and herself at the last. Her mother had lost control, so that she never tyrannized, but sat talking and complaining, or telling over the talk of illnesses past and present. But in her Mary found no leader, no help; she found nothing. Even the legend of Mrs. Amerson’s significance in the household had crumbled. Her selfishness had made the others selfish, so that they

thought of themselves first, and so that only Mary preserved any loyalty.

She sat thinking in fear that she would, after all, be forced to go back.

'I haven't the *strength* to stand by myself,' she thought sadly. A voice seemed to sound in her ear, saying, 'Why not try?' Even Edie seemed to stand by herself in this house. If Edie could do it, why could not Mary? Because she was bound—bound to home—bound to Septimus Bright. Oh, the first step to her freedom must be a cruelty! She must break off with Septimus! She must do it at once! Some other voice than hers asked clearly for pen and ink and paper; some other mind than hers dictated the letter to Septimus. She was afraid, trembling, self-contemptuous; but when the letter was written (although she felt she had chosen a coward's method) Mary felt herself free at last. It did not matter that the letter would never be sent; it was written, and it asked for her freedom. She could not smile: it was her adventure. She would not return home. She would find work. . . . Actually, she thought she could find work. Mrs. Dennett would help her to find it.

'And perhaps your mother could help me to find some work,' she said to Edie.

'Oh,' Edie protested. 'But we shan't ever let you go! Of course, we shall keep you. That's what I've always wanted. From the first time you came here. I'm going to look after you. Do you like me? Well, there—then you ought to *want* to stay with us! Q.E.D.! Roger says that means: "When Edie Dennett makes up her mind!"'

Roger! Mary's heart leapt: and a sudden flame reddened her cheeks.

V

On his arrival home that evening, Roger found Mary sitting by the fire, rather pale, but so much better that she was able to talk and to eat. He plunged into the room with something of his mother's impetuosity, and his heart gave a great jump when he saw Mary.

'You're better!' he cried. Mary turned towards him, and he saw the faint pink in her cheeks. 'No, don't get up!' he went on, as she showed her inclination to rise. 'This is famous! How d'you feel?'

Mary stayed silent, looking at him as though she could never speak. It seemed to her that there were so many things that could never be said—all the most beautiful things in her life were silent and perfectly to be understood in silence. Words were awkward, ugly weapons of offence, breaking the simplicity they sought to express, crude and barbarous. She was still in the slow dream of happiness that had begun when she found herself safe in this house. She had felt as though the Dennetts understood her smallest emotion. She was not yet able to see that ugly things continued as cancers continue, growing stronger and more powerful. Her time of despair was forgotten in a confidence as fresh as Spring.

It was not until Roger was beside her, and down upon one knee, holding her hand, that she awoke; and then she drew her hand back with a sudden instinct.

'I'm quite better,' she said, in a low voice.

'It *is* jolly good to see you!' Roger exclaimed. 'You're sure you're better? You gave us a nice old fright, I can tell you!'

His voice was warm with laughter, as it often was when he spoke to Edie; but his eyes were almost anxious. He felt he could not tell her yet about Septimus; yet, if she were troubled about him, perhaps it would be good to set

her fears aside. He was puzzled—and a little ashamed of himself. Why should he be?

‘I was afraid myself,’ Mary said. ‘I’ve been tremendously happy to-day—I’ve just forgotten everything. Roger, what about *you* . . . at the office?’

‘Bless you! As right as ninepence! You *knew* it would be!’

‘I hoped.’

‘All sorts of things I’ve got to tell you!’

Her face clouded. There were some things she was afraid to hear.

‘Only nice ones,’ she began. ‘Just now.’

Roger let his other knee slip down to the ground, and sat back on his heels.

‘I’d better not tell you,’ he said. ‘If you’re trying to sit happy in a charmed ring.’

‘Mabel?’ she asked. Then she flushed. ‘No . . . you don’t know. I’d forgotten.’

‘I know everything,’ he announced. ‘Mabel’s all right.’

She sat back in the chair, with closed eyes. Roger touched her hand again, very gently.

‘Don’t be silly, Roger,’ she said, with tears trembling and her mouth drawn.

‘Mayn’t I? Mary, you *know*!’ He was staring at her with a lover’s insistent eyes. ‘I want you frightfully!’

‘I *can’t*. Roger; you oughtn’t to . . .’

‘I know I oughtn’t. I know I’m a cad. But, my dear, I love you. . . . Look here! I won’t say any more. I thought it might . . . might interest you. . . .’

‘My dear good Roger!’ said Edie, in her clear voice. ‘She’s not to be excited. Goodness, the *trouble* I shall have!’

VI

Mrs. Amerson bade her children good night, and went upstairs to her room. Gran'ma was there, bent over the fire, upon which she was struggling to place an extra coal.

'Oh, dear,' Mrs. Amerson said, peevishly. 'We don't want any more coal *now*. It's time for bed, not for sitting over the fire!'

She sat down, near Gran'ma, and Gran'ma observed her steadily with her pale old eyes. Mrs. Amerson looked perfectly colourless by the artificial light, and her shapeless, heavy face had lost all expression but that of tiredness. She sat like a sack half emptied of its contents.

'You're tired,' Gran'ma said very slowly.

'It's enough to make me. . . . It's been such an upsetting day. . . . Oh, he's left me' Mrs. Amerson pressed her hands to her mouth, and her voice dwindled to a thin sound of complaint. She was crying.

'It's not *you* that ought to cry,' Gran'ma said, feebly. 'It's not *you* that ought to cry. You're only crying for excitement. Why don't you sit quiet here for a bit, and not give way as you're doing?' Half to herself she was talking on, apparently at random, but really with her mind alert and contemptuous. 'If you'd ever understood him; if you'd ever seen what you tried to kill in him, *then* you might cry. But *I'm* not crying; my grief's too much for crying. I've been sitting here thinking of him, and thinking of what he might have been, and what he was. I've been remembering how he made his way from a boy, working, and always rising. . . . And then he married you, and gave everything a man could. He gave his life to serve you, and worked and worked until he was weary of work. And you took everything and gave nothing. . . . All you've done is to destroy him, and bring children into the world that are no good to him or you or any other body in the whole wide world. And they'll go on as

you've taught them, with *your* blood in them, taking all the strength of others, and giving nothing. There's Tom will give nothing; and Ted will give nothing; and Grace will give nothing; and Mabel will give nothing. And my boy in his grave, after all these long years of work for you, who never understood that he wanted love more than his work . . . because of you, you always clinging to him, and taking away his strength like the woman you are. . . . And never a happy moment in the house because of you. You've always been the same, every day, hard under softness, vulgar under your silence. . . .'

Mrs. Amerson, won from her own reverie, listened with horror to Gran'ma's secret thoughts, for the first time bursting their prison and forming themselves into an indictment of herself. She could not move; but sat as though she were bound, listening to the quiet old voice drifting on in the unspoken thoughts of all those silent days that were past.

'I think there must be many women in the world who have done as you've done—taking a great strong quiet man and sucking the life from his veins; and bearing children to live after you and to help in the making of more misery than the world's ever known. And you're all as content with yourselves as if you'd given your lives to a great service. But you haven't. You've taken the best thing in the world, a good man, and you've made him into a machine to bring you your desires. But you're never happy, and you never bring happiness to a living creature. And when you're dead the evil you've done lives after you, may God forgive you; and your children live on, and the world lives. And wherever such as you have your being, unhappiness is all around you, and sadness. I suppose you must have some power to dishearten courage and fine souls; because everything is shaped to your selfish jealousy, and it grows distorted, so that fine natures wither, and you live on, destroying and killing, like the weeds you are in God's garden. . . .'

Gran'ma's voice faded ; and Mrs. Amerson, sitting quite still, could see her figure bent over the fire, and the flames of the fire flickering up until they cast reflected lights upon the wrinkled skin of her face. Mrs. Amerson tried stupidly to remember what it was that Teddy had once said Gran'ma resembled. . . .

Suddenly she started up and ran heavily to the door, screaming for Tom.



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